

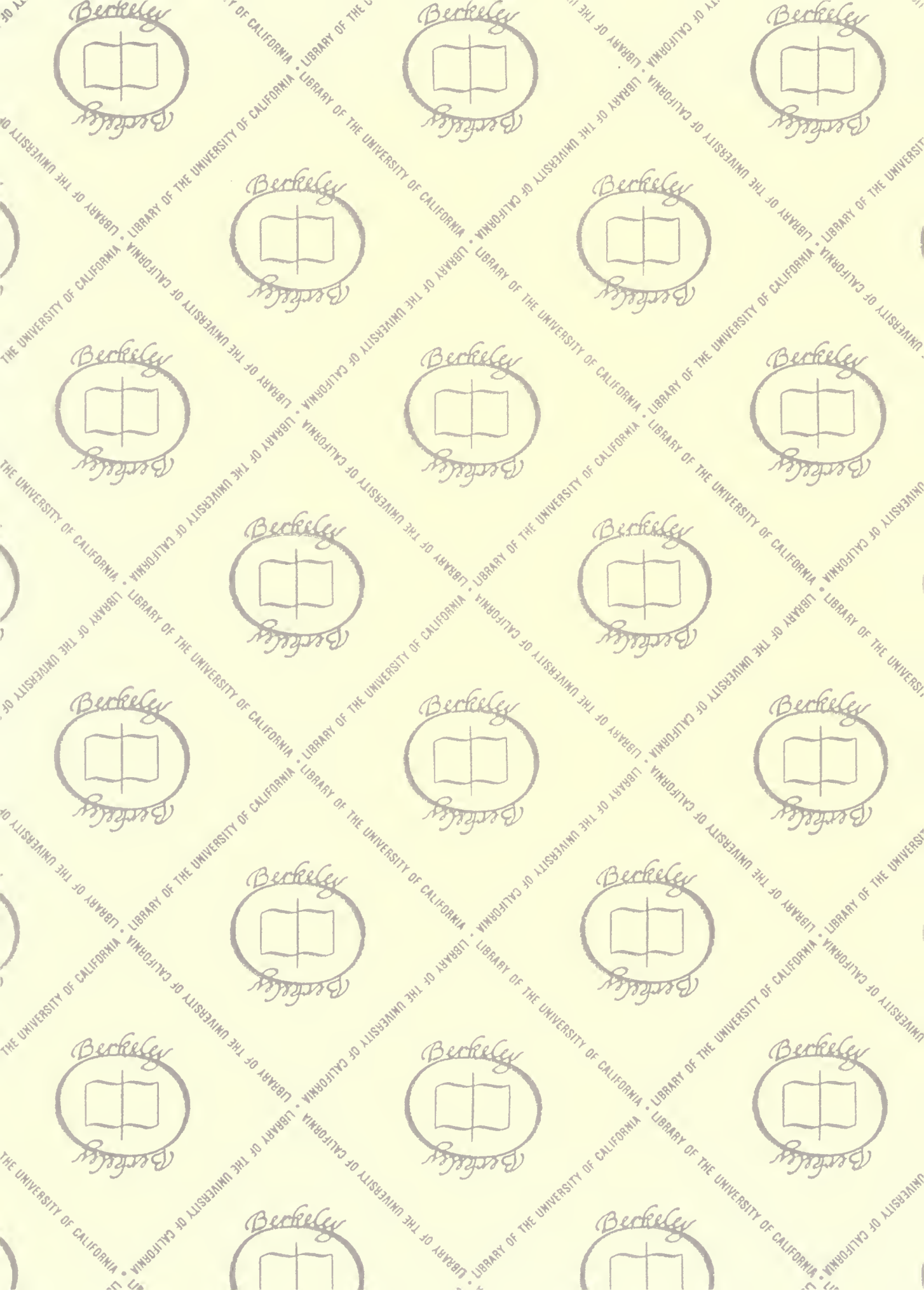
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Women in Politics Oral History Project

HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS PROJECT

Volume III

FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND THE THEATER:
THE YEARS BEFORE AND AFTER POLITICS

Interviews with:

Alis De Sola
Cornelia Palms
Walter R. Pick
Fay Bennett Watts

Interviews Conducted by
Amelia Fry and Ingrid Scobie
in 1976, 1977, 1978

Underwritten by grants from:

National Endowment for the Humanities, Rockefeller Foundation,
Members and Friends of the Los Angeles Democratic Women's Forum

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PREFACE

The following interview is one of a series of tape-recorded memoirs in the California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project. The series has been designed to study the political activities of a representative group of California women who became active in politics during the years between the passage of the woman's suffrage amendment and the current feminist movement--roughly the years between 1920 and 1965. They represent a variety of views: conservative, moderate, liberal, and radical, although most of them worked within the Democratic and Republican parties. They include elected and appointed officials at national, state, and local governmental levels. For many the route to leadership was through the political party--primarily those divisions of the party reserved for women.

Regardless of the ultimate political level attained, these women have all worked in election campaigns on behalf of issues and candidates. They have raised funds, addressed envelopes, rung doorbells, watched polls, staffed offices, given speeches, planned media coverage, and when permitted, helped set policy. While they enjoyed many successes, a few also experienced defeat as candidates for public office.

Their different family and cultural backgrounds, their social attitudes, and their personalities indicate clearly that there is no typical woman political leader; their candid, first-hand observations and their insights about their experiences provide fresh source material for the social and political history of women in the past half century.

In a broader framework their memoirs provide valuable insights into the political process as a whole. The memoirists have thoughtfully discussed details of party organization and the work of the men and women who served the party. They have analysed the process of selecting party leaders and candidates, running campaigns, raising funds, and drafting party platforms, as well as the more subtle aspects of political life such as maintaining harmony and coping with fatigue, frustration, and defeat. Perceived through it all are the pleasures of friendships, struggles, and triumphs in a common cause.

The California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project has been financed by both an outright and a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Matching funds were provided by the Rockefeller Foundation for the Helen Gahagan Douglas component of the project, by the Columbia and Fairtree Foundations, and by individuals who were interested in supporting memoirs of their friends and colleagues. In addition, funds from the California State Legislature-sponsored Knight-Brown Era Governmental History Project made it possible to increase the research and broaden the scope of the interviews in which there was

a meshing of the woman's political career with the topics being studied in the Knight-Brown project. Professors Judith Blake Davis, Albert Lepawsky, and Walton Bean have served as principal investigators during the period July 1975-December 1977 that the project was underway. This series is the second phase of the Women in Politics Oral History Project, the first of which dealt with the experiences of eleven women who had been leaders and rank-and-file workers in the suffrage movement.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons significant in the history of the West and the nation. The Office is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, Director of The Bancroft Library. Interviews were conducted by Amelia R. Fry, Miriam Stein, Gabrielle Morris, Malca Chall, Fern Ingersoll, and Ingrid Scobie.

Malca Chall, Project Director
Women in Politics Oral History Project

Willa Baum, Department Head
Regional Oral History Office

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- March Fong Eu, *High Achieving Nonconformist in Local and State Government*. 1977, 245 p.
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Interviews in Process

Marjorie Benedict, Pauline Davis, Ann Eliaser, Elinor R. Heller, Lucile Hosmer, Emily Pike, Carmen Warschaw, Mildred Younger.

August 1980

The Helen Gahagan Douglas Component of the California Women Political Leaders
Oral History Project

Volume I: *The Political Campaigns*

Discussion primarily of the 1950 Senate campaign and defeat, in interviews with Tilford E. Dudley, India T. Edwards, Leo Goodman, Kenneth R. Harding, Judge Byron F. Lindsley, Helen Lustig, Alvin P. Meyers, Frank Rogers, and William Malone.*

Volume II: *The Congress Years, 1944-1950*

Discussion of organization and staffing; legislation on migrant labor, land, power and water, civilian control of atomic energy, foreign policy, the United Nations, social welfare, and economics, in interviews with Juanita E. Barbee, Rachel S. Bell, Albert S. Cahn, Margery Cahn, Evelyn Chavoor, Lucy Kramer Cohen, Arthur Goldschmidt, Elizabeth Wickenden Goldschmidt, Chester E. Holifield, Charles Hogan, Mary Keyserling, and Philip J. Noel-Baker.

Volume III: *Family, Friends, and the Theater: The Years Before and After Politics*

Discussion of Helen and Melvyn Douglas and their activities at home with their family and among friends, and their work in the theater and movies, in interviews with Fay Bennett, Alis De Sola, Cornelia C. Palms, and Walter R. Pick.

Volume IV: *Congresswoman, Actress, and Opera Singer*

Helen Gahagan Douglas discusses her background and childhood; Barnard College education; Broadway, theater and opera years; early political organization and Democratic party work; the congressional campaigns, supporters; home and office in Washington; issues during the Congress years, 1944-1950; the 1950 Senate campaign against Richard M. Nixon, and aftermath; women and independence; occupations since 1950; speaking engagements, travel to Russia, South America, Liberia inauguration, civic activities, life in Vermont. (Volume in process)

*William Malone preferred not to release his transcript at this time.

April 1981

INTRODUCTION

Helen Gahagan Douglas, one of the most notable women to grace the American artistic and political scenes during the past half-century, died of cancer in June 1980 at the age of eighty. Despite frequent hospitalization and progressive weakness during the last several years of her life, she courageously refused drugs to ease her pain, preferring to keep her mind clear so that she could remain close to her family; so that she, among other activities, could speak to a congressional hearing in Washington by phone on behalf of cancer research; so that she could organize assistance programs for children in New York City; and so that she could complete her autobiography. She insisted on living as fully as possible until the disease overtook her. A year before her death, she received a Medal of Distinction from her alma mater Barnard College, for her "fearless, lifetime devotion to the cause of political, racial and religious freedoms and for instructing us in citizenship, in responsibility and in service to ideals and country."

Within her lifetime, three generations of Americans came to know Helen Douglas. First a generation knew her as a beautiful and highly talented stage and movie actress whose storybook romance with fellow actor Melvyn Douglas culminated in a marriage that lasted nearly fifty years. She then picked up another generation when, taking leave of her career as an actress, she devoted her energies, her intelligence, and her charisma to politics. She was Democratic National Committeewoman for California (1940-1944), vice-chair of the California Democratic party in charge of its women's division (1942-1944), Congresswoman from California (1944-1950), and an alternate delegate to the United Nations General Assembly (1946).

During these ten years she pled the cause of the poor and helpless, especially the migrant farm worker, fought successfully for civilian control of atomic energy, and argued the case for improved international relations. In 1950 she lost a hard-fought campaign for Senate to Richard Nixon and disappeared from public attention. She and Melvyn moved to New York and Vermont, where she continued to study and lecture about those issues to which she had always been committed--human rights and world peace. And as always, her activities involved her family and many close and devoted friends.

After the advent of Watergate in 1972 the media sought her out to appraise Richard Nixon in light of her experiences. Thus a third generation was introduced to the legendary Helen Gahagan Douglas.

This volume is one of four that comprise the Helen Gahagan Douglas Unit of the California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project, a unit to document the career of this leading humanitarian and political figure.

In 1974 the Regional Oral History Office received a grant and a matching grant offer from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a series of biographical interviews with women who had held leadership positions in

California politics between 1920 and 1965. Helen Gahagan Douglas, one of the best known women in California politics during that period, was among those listed as potential interviewees. Recognizing Helen Douglas's historicity, the Rockefeller Foundation agreed to a match to fund Helen Gahagan Douglas's interview with the proviso that the project include persons who had been associated with her.

The Helen Gahagan Douglas oral history unit, as it ultimately evolved, was comprised of Helen Douglas and twenty-five men and women who had known her as a friend and/or associate at important bench marks in her life--in college, the theater, and during and following her active political career.

Mrs. Douglas assisted in the selection of these representative persons whom she thought would provide useful and objective information about her activities throughout her life. In addition to the interviews in the Helen Gahagan Douglas Unit, other women in the series discussed her in their own interviews; former associates Paul Taylor and Judge Oliver Carter had talked about her previously in their oral histories.

During the years between 1974 when the project was initiated and its completion in 1981, inflation cut deeply into the initial grants, requiring the office to seek additional funding. To the rescue came members and friends of the Democratic Women's Forum in Los Angeles, an organization which Helen Douglas helped to establish in the mid-forties. Later the National Endowment and the Rockefeller Foundation gave additional grants.

The project has depended on the efforts of a number of persons. Interviewers were Amelia Fry, Eleanor Glaser, Fern Ingersoll, Ingrid Scobie, and Malca Chall. Catherine Scholten prepared the lengthy, much-emended Douglas transcript for typing, and also selected the photographs and appendix material. Teresa Allen helped develop the plan to keep track of the interviews from transcribing through final typing. Marie Herold was responsible for preparing the indexes, and for tying up the countless loose ends which are always present in long-term projects.

The material contained in these volumes and others in the California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project should provide students with fresh information and insights into the life and political and social milieu of Helen Douglas. Those seeking additional information will find it in the Helen Gahagan Douglas papers in the Carl Albert Congressional Research Center at the University of Oklahoma, and in the collections of Melvyn Douglas papers in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Indiana University. In this latter collection Ingrid Winther Scobie plans to deposit the tapes of interviews she has conducted while preparing for her upcoming biography of Mrs. Douglas. The Roosevelt library also contains much source material on Helen Douglas, her friendship with the Roosevelts and other leading New Dealers, and her activities in the Democratic party.

Fortunately for historians these interviews in the Douglas unit were completed just prior to the recent deaths of Helen Gahagan Douglas, Albert Cahn, Charles Hogan, Alvin Meyers, and Walter Pick. The Regional Oral History Office is grateful for the financial support of the foundations and the friends of Helen Gahagan Douglas, and for the assistance of the hardworking staff, factors which have made possible this oral history project about an active and influential participant in an important era of American history.

Malca Chall, Project Director
Women in Politics Oral History Project

Willa Baum, Department Head
Regional Oral History Office

8 June 1981
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On behalf of future scholars the Office wishes to thank the friends of Helen Gahagan Douglas who responded to the request for funds sponsored by the Los Angeles Democratic Women's Forum, especially Marie Melgaso and Elizabeth Snyder who spearheaded that effort. These contributions helped match the grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation, thereby making possible the production of the Helen Gahagan Douglas Unit of the California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project.

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HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS PROJECT

Alis De Sola

HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS: COLLEGE AND THE THEATER

An Interview Conducted by
Amelia Fry
in 1976

Underwritten by grants from:

National Endowment for the Humanities, Rockefeller Foundation,
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ALIS DE SOLA

1959

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Time of Interview: The afternoon of June 30, 1976

Place of Interview: Alis De Sola's apartment

As a memoirist for the series about Helen Gahagan Douglas, Alis De Sola was chosen initially to set down her recollections of those college days which she shared with Helen at Barnard College in New York. The object originally was to capture the fission and, later, the fusion of their friendship, including their expectations, their teachers, the debates, the boy friends, the Athenian pageants, and the launching of Helen's career as an actress through the storm of her father's protests.

It seemed important, too, to explore beyond the Helen Gahagan Douglas focus in order to record at least the skeletal recollections of Alis De Sola's own life--her unique family background, her political activism, and her literary accomplishments.

Alis had agreed on short notice to be interviewed--a phone call at noon set a session at 3:00 that afternoon. What would have been a memorable and heroic effort for some women was for her just another set of challenges: she was plagued with hoarseness and fits of residual coughing from her fourth bout of influenza that spring; she was supposed to keep her right foot hanging over the arm of her chair because of a recent injury; she also had guests coming for dinner. Her apartment was pleasant, near Central Park, and was graced with the greenery of indoor plants; however, it was a hot, muggy New York day and we had the choice of either tape recording against the noise of the air conditioner or opening the windows. We chose the latter, and unfortunately the traffic outside became louder as the interview progressed.

But in spite of just emerging from what she called her "Job period," she was bouncy, articulate, and friendly. Her mind was vigorous and moving rapidly as she applied herself to the interview with both enthusiasm and a research writer's eye. When the "pause" button on the taping machine failed to release and the last twenty minutes of tape did not record, she gamely re-recorded the same stories--but focussed on a different approach so that although the facts were the same, neither of us felt repetitive.

This is the woman who is a playwright, a short story writer, at times

a publicist for Helen Douglas, a Voice of America program director, and editor-in-chief of the Muscular Dystrophy Association. At the time of the interview she had "retired" to the status of a busy free-lance consultant. She is obviously a free spirit: her background of U.S.-Puerto Rican-German nationalities, with three languages equally learned, formed wide limits for her talent.

As a friend to both Melvyn and Helen Douglas, she visits them fairly regularly now in their homes in New York and Vermont. She and Helen enjoy walking in the Vermont woods near the Douglasses' summertime compound, picking mushrooms, maybe cooking a new dish. She and Melvyn "talk for hours" or perhaps play scrabble. "Each of them fulfills me in a different way," she says.

Ingrid Winther Scobie edited the transcript for accuracy of names and the inevitable ambiguities that occur in converting oral language to written. Shortly after the interview was sent to Alis on December 17, 1977, protests ricocheted back through the mail: "...it seems to be as much--or more--about me as about Helen." Also, the section about her play on Ferdinand Lassalle would have to be cut drastically. Her implication was that other sections might fall under her red pen, too. After being warned of the risk of coronary attacks in this office if she cut too much, she retyped only three or four much-corrected pages, to tighten up the script, and she did indeed shorten the section on the Lassalle play. But she also left in everything else and took pains to preserve the conversational syntax even when clarifying passages here and there.

What we have here, then, is another window on Helen Gahagan Douglas with a minimal framework of references about the life, up to now, of Alis De Sola. If it is lucky, the world someday should see a complete autobiography of this "Alice of the Sun" in her own penetrating and simmering style.

Amelia R. Fry
Interviewer-Editor

23 February 1978
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I HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS: COLLEGE AND THE THEATER

[Interview 1: June 30, 1976]

[begin tape 1, side A]

Childhood: A Blend of Cultures

Fry: What we might need is a paragraph or two on where you came from. We're going to start with your meeting Helen Gahagan [Douglas] at your first day of college, and her first day of college at Barnard, but first, what was your background?

De Sola: It's a little complicated. [Laughs] I can't tell it in a particularly short time. I come from a South American family, from Venezuela. Both my mother and father were born there. But my mother's father was a German who had settled in Venezuela. He married this very beautiful woman and had five children, and he then was shot to death when he was in his thirties, by an employee whom he had fired. My grandmother, who was an orphan, was left with five small children. My mother was the oldest, and she wasn't yet ten. There were really very minor resources. Grandfather had been doing well but, you know, suddenly it all stopped. His family in Germany offered to help her educate the children, if she would bring them all to Germany.

So she set off, and with a lot of animals, too, because my grandfather had been one of those "bring-'em-back-alive" people. He used to stock German zoos with animals from the jungles in Venezuela and Colombia and places like that. He had a big menagerie at his house. I went to see it long after I was grown up, and it was really quite extraordinary, a beautiful sort of withdrawn place on a river a mile or two from the coast at Puerto Cabello. He had two seals, and he had an eagle and a bear and a lot of monkeys. Anyway, some of these creatures went along to Germany with them, plus two black maids. You could see that it would seem a little exotic to people in a small town, Stendal, in what is now East Germany (but then wasn't, of course.)

De Sola: S-t-e-n-d-a-l. Like the author but no "h" in it. Anyway, that's where my mother and her family--her brothers and sisters--grew up. When mother was a young woman, my father's family invited her back to Venezuela--to Caracas, the capital--for a year of social activity. She met my father then, though he had been brought up here, in the United States. Very complicated. Our family is just very mixed up.

Fry: A United Nations.

De Sola: Yes. They fell in love, and he followed her back to Germany, and they got married there, in 1895, I think. Now my grandmother--she always spoke German with an accent, when she got there she didn't speak any German--never went back to South America. She remained mostly in Germany, but a little in France and Czechoslovakia, where she went to spas and things.

My mother was very devoted to her mother. She used to go back to Germany to visit her. After she married my father, they went to live in Puerto Rico, where he bought quite a lot of land and, for a while, did very well, until the Democrats came in and loused up the sugar trade! [Laughter] He remained a Democrat all his life, however. [Laughs] Anyway, it was because my mother was sort of lonely for her mother that, two months before I was born, she packed up and went to Germany, taking my older brother along. That is why I was born in Germany! This has been a complication of my life ever since. Once, because my first name some people think, is a man's name, I got a letter saying there was a record of my birth, and I had to return for military duty! [Laughs heartily]

Fry: To Germany? [Laughs] Well, you might have gotten a free trip out of that. I'm sure they wouldn't have taken you, once you got there. [Laughs]

De Sola: Anyway that makes me a citizen of three countries.

Fry: Did you grow up in Puerto Rico?

De Sola: Well, I spent nine years there, except for these trips to Germany in between. Then, when we were in Germany just before the First World War, my mother received a cable from my father saying he was ruined. This was the sugar situation. With free trade coming in, Puerto Rico's preferred sugar was much more expensive than Cuba's, and now it had to compete with Cuba, so all the plantations were failing. So, instead of going back to Puerto Rico, we came here. We lived in Brooklyn from the time I was about ten years old.

Fry: Okay, but you didn't know Helen in Brooklyn.

De Sola: No. Though we both lived there, we met in college.

As you can imagine, I was sort of a freak in Brooklyn, with my peculiar background, the fact that I had governesses and nobody else had them here, and that I wore pinafores and nobody else wore pinafores. I became a very--shall I say--remote sort of person, I think. I mean, I got along well with other children, but my first impulse always is to stand back.

Fry: Really?

De Sola: Well, for one thing, I have really no country. I was a citizen of three countries, Germany, Venezuela, and the U.S. Germany took me as I was born there. My parents were born citizens of Venezuela, so I was born one, as Venezuela just considers any child of people born there a citizen, too. And my father was a U.S. citizen--as, in fact, his father was, too! So I could have opted for any of these relationships. I never was sure where I belonged. For another thing, we travelled so much we never seemed to belong anywhere, because wherever we went, we didn't speak the language of the country at home. That was so we wouldn't forget our other languages, you know. [Laughs]

Fry: Yes, and you never knew what your own language was?

De Sola: I had no "own" language. I had three languages, and I spoke them interchangeably. I think that this makes one a little remote--detached anyway. I know I was as a child. I remember I made some good friends in Brooklyn. But everybody seemed very strange to me, and I used to look at people with intense curiosity, staring at them, really. One little girl--her name was Lavinia Stuart, and she claimed to be descended from Mary, Queen of Scots--which I don't believe. [Laughs] Anyway, she said, [mimics a low, deadly voice] "Don't look at me like that. Your eyes are so piercing. I think you are a witch!" [Laughs gleefully]

Fry: [Wryly] That must have added to your self-confidence.

De Sola: At first, it absolutely pained me. I really thought that I'd made good relationships, and I was quite happy on the whole. But the second reaction, which I think had an effect on my future personality, was that I suddenly felt very powerful. I could scare people--just by looking at them! [Laughs]

Fry: About how old were you then?

De Sola: About ten or eleven. It was a very strange feeling. I mean, there was this wounded feeling first, and then the other thing. [Laughs]

Fry: That really gave you an ace up your sleeve.

Friendship with Helen Gahagan Douglas

English Class at Barnard

Fry: By the time you got to Barnard, were you still feeling a little bit shy and retiring?

De Sola: No, I don't think so. That episode, and others, had given me a great deal of confidence in myself. For one thing, I always did very well in school, and teachers liked me. I was almost always a rebel, and was constantly being suspended from school, but I got very good marks, so it never was final.

When I got to Barnard, I had a sort of chip-on-my-shoulder attitude: "Look, anybody who tells me to do anything, I won't do it!" I was quite sure of myself, intellectually. At the same time, I think I was emotionally very peculiar. [Laughs]

Fry: Now that you look back on it?

De Sola: I used to sit in the back of the classroom and mutter--I mean, I hadn't learned to project my voice. And Helen sat in the front of the room and yelled. [Laughter] And we obviously were quite aware of each other because, as she said later, she loathed the way I muttered there behind her! [Laughs]

At that time I had long hair and wore it up like some fancy movie star of the time. I looked much older than I was. When I went to register for college--I was only sixteen--they asked me whether I wanted to go into a special class, and I said, "Why?" They said, "Most women your age don't want to go through the regular courses." I said, "How old do you think I am?" They thought I was twenty-five! [Laughs] Anyway, Helen thought it was beautiful hair, but to me it was a bother. It was too much work, since I didn't live in college. I commuted. (My family having lost their money, they couldn't afford to have me live there.) It was just too much to put it up every morning, so I had it cut. Helen said that that was the end, as far as she was concerned. The one thing she liked about me was my hair! [Laughter] It wasn't until later that I learned all this. Helen herself lived in college but she came to class every day--it was a nine o'clock class--with her hair all messy, her stockings torn. I thought, [laughs] "My God, she lives

De Sola: here and can't even dress herself right!" [Laughter] We grew to dislike each other heartily! It was our teacher, Professor Sturtevant, who decided we were kindred spirits!

Fry: Your drama teacher?

De Sola: No, she was the English A teacher--a required composition course. She also taught a course called "Epic and Romance", and we took that course later. This was just introductory English. She found one thing we agreed on: we both believed there should be an Irish republic--I because I was fascinated by the Irish writers of the Renaissance, the Irish literary writers, [William Butler] Yeats and [John M.] Synge and Lady [Augusta] Gregory and [George] Moore and so forth, and Helen because she decided she was of Irish background.

Fry: At least partly through her father.

De Sola: Just a bit... Her mother would say, [mimicking Irish accent] "There's very little Irish in her! I don't know why she keeps saying that she's Irish!" [Laughs]

Fry: That's interesting.

De Sola: We had to debate on Irish independence in that class. I was made head of the debate, and Helen was put on my team. We used to meet to discuss things. There was one gal who was very rational, so I decided right away to put her in charge of the economics of the situation, and somebody else was to speak on the political side. But Helen, I decided, should just carry the emotional argument. (I didn't participate in the debate myself.)

Anyway, one day I was in Helen's apartment. She lived right off campus, in one of a series of apartments; they got them because the regular dorms were full. This is when the change in our relationship occurred. As we were talking--about the debate--I said, "You know, you can do this, or that." Very detached, you know, unemotional. Suddenly, she flung her arms around me and said, "You know, I think I love you!" [Laughs] Which is very characteristic of Helen, I think!

Fry: Yes. So suddenly you were friends.

De Sola: Yes. We became friends, and we remained friends. The rest of the time she was in college, we took a lot of the same courses. I coached her through a history of philosophy course. [Laughs] We wrote a play together, Shadow of the Moon, which was produced.

Launching Helen's Theatrical Career

Fry: How did you happen to write the play together?

De Sola: In connection with a course we took in our sophomore year--the one I mentioned earlier, called "Epic and Romance," given by Professor Sturtevant, our freshman English teacher. Among the epics we studied were those of early Ireland, the Tain Bó Cuailnge. Since we had this obsession with all things Irish, it fascinated us.

Fry: Could you repeat the name of that Irish epic?

De Sola: The Tain Bó Cuailnge. Like the Norse Eddas, it tells the story of a culture hero, in this case a man called Cú Chulainn. One episode in it appealed to us particularly--the account of Cú Chulainn's sortie into fairyland and his relations with its powerful queen, whose name, I'm sorry to say, I've forgotten. The point of the episode is this: the hero thought he'd just drop in for an afternoon but, once he was there under the spell of the queen, time no longer had a meaning for him and he stayed a hundred years. We decided we could make a good one-act play out of this episode, and that's what we did, submitting it to the class as a joint term paper.

Fry: And then you got it produced?

De Sola: We were lucky. Elizabeth Grimball, the woman who'd been Helen's drama teacher at her preparatory school--was it Berkley?

Fry: Yes, Berkley School.

De Sola: Well, Miss Grimball was at this time producing what we'd now call "off-off Broadway" plays. So naturally Helen showed her our script. She liked it and said she'd put it on, with Helen playing the lead. That was the role of the fairy queen. Not a fairy queen in the Shakespearean sense, however. In Ireland, fairies were regarded as very powerful people. They were called "the little people" as camouflage, but they were magnificent great creatures. Helen of course was ideal for the part.

In a way that performance was the beginning of her theatrical career, so in that sense it was important.

Fry: Were you in it?

De Sola: No, no. I'm in no sense an actress.

Fry: Did you have anything to do with this production of Elizabeth Grimball's?

De Sola: Yes. I went to rehearsals, and I was consulted about interpretation. I worked with Helen to a certain extent, but entirely behind the scenes. We talked about how lines should be read--emphatic--that sort of thing.

Fry: You had produced it once at Barnard, right?

De Sola: No, no. We just wrote it for the class. The only production was this outside one, which was, as I recall, at the Lenox Hill Theater, a small theater somewhere in the Seventies, the East Seventies [in Manhattan]. It's curious that I don't remember just where it was, only its name. Somewhere or other I may even have the review of the production.

Fry: That would be marvelous if you do.

De Sola: If I find it, I'll give it to you, but I can't remember where I put it.

Fry: Well, if you do find it, I hope you'll mail it to us. We'll add it as an illustration in your manuscript.

De Sola: Anyway, she appeared several times in the play--there were three or four performances, I think.

One night Harry Gribble came to see it. He was quite a successful playwright at the time and also a friend of Miss Grimball's. Now (1922), he had just finished another play, Shoot, and he wanted Miss Grimball to try it out so that he could correct anything wrong with it before committing it to Broadway, and he said, "I want that girl in it." That girl was Helen. All this took place in the spring of our sophomore year. When she should have been studying for exams, she was rehearsing and performing--first in our play then in Harry's. That one had a week's tryout. In the course of it, Grace George, who was the wife of the Broadway producer, William A. Brady, saw Helen in it. She was scouting, looking for an ingenue, a young actress. You see, Brady's daughter, Alice, who had been playing ingenue parts for him, was getting just a little old for them, and anyway she had a Hollywood contract. So Grace George saw her and evidently--Helen was so beautiful. I don't know whether she was a great actress then, but she certainly had the makings of a great actress. She conveyed power, emotional power, which is quite unusual for so young a girl. She was two years older than I so she couldn't have been more than twenty. Of course, she had done a lot in the theater, mostly with Miss Grimball. She's probably told you that. And all during her childhood, she had appeared in school plays and other performances. So she had confidence, she knew her way around the stage. But there was something more--real emotional control--and that needed some doing, partly because her capacity

De Sola: for feeling was almost too big for her.

Later, I noticed that, when she was in what I call "small" plays--you know, plays that have no great substance to them--her gestures were somehow too large.

Fry: For the play?

De Sola: Yes. Though in some things, such as Trelawney of the Wells (1926), and The Second Mrs. Tanqueray--even though they were lightweight pieces, the characters had a lot of space around them, and she was very good in those. It was only when there was neither emotional depth nor--what shall I say--charmed depth that she seemed lost, groping for something?

Fry: Restraint?

De Sola: Yes, I suppose. There was one play, I've forgotten what it was, a light comedy. At rehearsals, the director kept saying to me, "Her movements are too large." They were. I could see that they were. He was right. But, by holding her in, he destroyed the very thing that made her a fine actress.

The greatest role she ever played, I'm convinced--Melvyn [Douglas] directed her in it early in the thirties--was in Dan Totheroh's Moor Born. The play was about the Brontës and she played Emily. It's a performance that remains in my mind, vividly, after all these years. It was tremendously powerful. I mean, she created not only the character, but the moors as well, everything. She really should have played Shakespeare, plays with dimension. That's what she was made for.

Fry: I think there was some discussion about her going on into more serious drama at the time that she left the theater for opera.

De Sola: There was. She'd been in Young Woodley. * It was a good part. Even though it was too old for her, really, she played it very well. The personality was a complex personality, and an interesting one, but it didn't have grandeur. What Helen had, above everything else, was grandeur. I think she still has it.

Fry: Yes, she does.

De Sola: It's in her movements, in her attitudes, in everything. I think she missed her role in the theater. I never fully understood why.

* A play by John Van Druten in which she co-starred with Glen Hunter. 1925.

Parental Attitudes Towards Helen's Acting and Singing

De Sola: Then, of course, she was still quite young--about twenty-seven--when she decided to go off and sing, which was largely her mother's influence. Her mother had a very beautiful voice. When she was a schoolteacher out somewhere in the West, it was her dream that some day she'd sing--in public, in concert or opera. Instead, she married Mr. Gahagan, who was a very devoted husband and father, but also a very conventional soul.

He said, "No, Lillie, you drop it." She told me this herself. She said it almost broke her heart. When they came to New York, she took singing lessons. That was all right; he didn't mind her taking the lessons, but when her teacher wanted her to sing in public, nothing doing! She told me her teacher said that she had one of the truly great voices of the century. That's sad.

Fry: It really is.

De Sola: My greatgrandmother went through the same thing--my German great-grandmother. She was supposed to have had one of these great coloraturas. She sang at court, before the emperor, and she sang privately, but never before the general public. It wasn't done at that time. So I could understand Mrs. Gahagan's frustration very well.

Fry: But Helen never had any problems with knowing that she would just go right ahead and do whatever she wanted to do?

De Sola: Oh no, although she had a lot of problems with her father when she wanted to go on the stage.

Fry: I wanted to ask you--as her best friend, were you in a confidant position?

De Sola: Oh, yes.

Fry: Did you weather this whole thing?

De Sola: Not only with her but with Papa. Papa liked me because I was a good student. You see, I was an honor student, and he thought this would rub off on Helen, if only I could make her do it! He invited me to dinner with him alone one night, and he said, "Look, just make her finish college. After that, I won't stand in her way." And I said, "But you know, college isn't meant for her. She belongs on the stage." He got mad at me, too. Then he went up to the college and really blew his top at this teacher, Professor Sturtevant, who was so fond of Helen and me, and encouraged us so much.

Fry: He did?

De Sola: Oh, yes. He was very difficult. Her mother was the one who backed her.

Fry: He was very active in his opposition?

De Sola: Very active. Very angry about the whole thing. It wasn't easy for Helen at first. But a generation had passed, and there were a lot of people supporting her in college. And then there was Miss Grimball who'd taught her acting and who was like a second mother to her, almost. Helen just did it. I think she sort of got away with it. She'd tell her father, "Look, it's only for the summer," because she was offered a role in a crazy play which didn't last too long--about two months. It was a minor role, but it prepared critics for her because she looked stunning in it. And by the end of the summer in 1922, she opened as a star in Owen Davis' play, Dreams for Sale.

Fry: That was when her father really had to face up to the fact that she was an actress, a professional actress.

De Sola: Yes, that she was no longer just playing around with it.

Fry: Well, how did Helen seem to handle her father through all this?

De Sola: You know, I've read some of her autobiography recently and she seems so timid in it! I don't remember her as being timid! But she still seems, now, to be overwhelmed by her father, who was a very powerful person and, as I say, pretty nasty about all this. He made himself very disagreeable.

Fry: Was this to the English teacher?

De Sola: Yes. Incidentally, I remained friends with her for many years... until she died in the '60s. She told me once, "I've never been in contact with such a bully!" That's the way she characterized him. Helen's father. Yes. Helen sort of washes over these things gently in her autobiography manuscript, but it was a rough situation.

Fry: She really had a strong feeling for her father, so there must have been a tremendous struggle.

De Sola: Yes, she did. Too strong, really. He was good to her, of course. In some ways, he was very good to her, and to all his children. But she was under his thumb a little, which makes it even more surprising that she had the guts to get out from under. I think it was because she believed in herself so much.

- De Sola: Once, when I was spending the night at her house in Brooklyn, she was taking a bath and I was sitting on a stool beside her. She said, "You know, I've decided that anything I really want, I'm going to get. Anything I really want to do, I'm going to do. It's all up to me." So there was this powerful belief in herself.
- Fry: It sounds like she was coming to realize that, in spite of the fact that her father held such sway over her, she was truly a separate person.
- De Sola: Yes.
- Fry: Her going into this first play, then, must have been more than just a professional decision with her. It was a more basic decision?
- De Sola: Yes. Maybe the Grimbball play wasn't so much, because that was for Miss Grimbball, and she'd been doing plays with her all along. But when she went into the Brady play, that was professional theater, even though it wasn't a big part, that first one--some sort of society girl.
- Fry: She knew her father was going to blow his top about that, I guess. Do you know how he reacted to that? All Helen seems to know is that he told Brady to "keep her clean," and that was about it.
- De Sola: He told me that, too. He felt she was too young to go into the theater. He had these crazy ideas that so many people had at the time.
- Fry: You can't be an actress--
- De Sola: --without corruption. I said, "Oh, nonsense." I remember saying that. I said, "Helen isn't like that. Stop worrying about it!" And I said, "The more you support her, the less she'd do that." But he never quite bought it. He wanted an intellectual for a daughter, like me. It pleased him that I liked books and didn't want to "display my body before the multitudes" and all that. In a way, I suppose, he was very fond of me. Yet, I never really thought he liked me. While Mrs. Gahagan never made any point of being fond of me, I think she did like me. I liked her much better, certainly, as a person. I think, I really think, Helen's strength came from her.
- Fry: Oh, is that right?
- De Sola: Yes, I think so. She kept her counsel. She didn't fight with her husband, but she was firm. And she backed Helen all the way.
- Fry: Her mother then was a woman who did just go ahead and quietly manage things?

De Sola: Yes, she was one of those strong women behind the scenes. In another generation, she wouldn't have been as much the homebody as she was. She had too much on the ball for that.

[end tape 1, side A; begin tape 1, side B]

I think she always wanted Helen to go into opera. I know she kept having her take lessons, even when she was on the stage. You know, I never really knew just how that came about, whether Helen decided on her own, or whether her mother persuaded her to take two years off and just study voice. But that's what she did.

Boyfriends and Chaperones

Fry: When she did go on Broadway, then, starting with Brady, were you aware of how closely she was chaperoned?

De Sola: Yes. It wasn't quite as bad as you'd think, though. I remember I went out on double dates with her quite frequently then.

Fry: That's what I want to know more about.

De Sola: Actually, they weren't private dates. She usually had a whole contingent of people from the theater and whatnot. I remember there were some Russians--Misha and Masha. We used to go out with them, go to Second Avenue cafés. You know those famous old cafés--Café Royale, and what not. For me it wasn't a romantic thing.

Fry: It was a group.

De Sola: Yes. My romantic things I kept on the side, and hers she kept on the side. But we did go out a lot unchaperoned. I think it was partly because, if I was along, the family didn't insist on chaperonage. When she went on tour, this girl from college, Minnie Mae--isn't that funny, I've forgotten her last name. Anyway, Minnie Mae came from Dallas, and she had a lot of money and she just appointed herself, I guess, as unofficial chaperone. She travelled with Helen on her tours, always paying her own way, of course. She may have had some private little arrangement with Mr. Gahagan, and Helen always liked to have people she knew around.

Minnie Mae sometimes became a little smothering, but she was a kind, thoughtful person. Certainly she saved Helen a lot of trouble. Maybe too much! As I say, she sort of smothered Helen, which I didn't feel was good. I mean, I never did that, though I

De Sola: was close to her. I never tried to save her trouble, pick up her clothes, for instance. I thought she was old enough to do it herself. Minnie Mae was much more like a mother hen, though she was not much older than Helen. She could have been twenty years older, from the way she behaved.

Fry: Helen told me once she [Helen] was in love with a different man every two weeks or so.

De Sola: They really weren't serious things. I know she was always thinking she was in love, but the next day it would be over. I never took her seriously, because it was obvious that she was enchanted by the idea of being in love, rather than being in love.

Fry: When did she change, into looking at love seriously?

De Sola: I would say it was in the late twenties, when she was in Young Woodley. There was a producer or someone that she was quite keen about.

You know, she had a very drastic effect on men. She looked lush and sultry, but she wasn't lush. She was really a puritan, awfully pure. [Laughs] I don't know if I should be saying this, but even when she sort of finally decided that, well, she'd go to bed with a man, he couldn't function! [Laughs] So she remained pure!

Fry: I guess that can happen.

De Sola: She was so damned innocent! Even intellectually. You see. I was rather innocent too, in a way, but not intellectually innocent. I'd read too much.

Fry: But Helen? Do you mean that she hadn't even gotten it by the back door, through novels? [Laughter]

De Sola: At that time, of course, girls tended to be more innocent than--I don't say nowadays, but even the last generation.

I remember one gal in our class, a very fine musician and composer; she'd decided that she was going to have an affair. We all gave her pieces of clothes...nice things to wear...on the condition that she'd tell us all about it. [Laughs]

Well, she came back on Monday morning. She never went through with it. She went to the Martha Washington Hotel, which is a women's hostel, and spent the weekend there! So it shows you that obviously we were much more repressed than seems possible nowadays.

Fry: She just couldn't face it?

De Sola: No. She had dinner with him, and I guess she went to his apartment, and then just fled. [Laughs] So it isn't that there was anything remarkable about Helen's being pure. Most of us were. It was just that she retained her purity longer. She was thirty, I guess, before she married. Most of us married in our early twenties. It just seemed--in her circumstances, and in the life she led otherwise--it seemed more unusual that she should be so.

Fry: That she should last so long as a single woman?

De Sola: Right.

Fry: Yes, that was unusual then.

De Sola: Of course, part of it was that so many men adored her rather than made passes at her.

Fry: She must have had a problem in men relating to her as a real human being.

De Sola: Yes, she was put on a pedestal.

Fry: She was so beautiful.

De Sola: She was beautiful, and she was innocent, and the combination, I think, just floored most men.

Fry: It would have made it difficult for them to relate to her, in bed or anywhere else?

De Sola: Yes. Partly because that was the puritanism in her family.

Fry: From her mother and father?

De Sola: From her mother and father both, really. I don't know. It was a combination. It encouraged me, sometimes, because if she had grown up in Europe, where if you were in the theater, you couldn't help being more--

Fry: Worldly?

De Sola: Worldly and whatnot. Because she really was not worldly. That word is good. She was unworldly.

Fry: Of course, her father had made such a point of that as the basis of his opposition.

De Sola: You know, she could get away with it in a way that a lot of women couldn't, because men liked to be seen with her even if she wasn't going to bed with them. I mean, people like me had to fight, but she didn't. If she just didn't want to, that was it.

Reflections on Melvyn

Fry: What do you think was the difference with Melvyn? Why do you think she got married? Her father had died a short time before, and--

De Sola: I don't know how to judge because, you see, that was one of the times that I hadn't seen her for a long while. She had been in Europe, singing, and then her father got ill and she had come home to act in a play about an opera singer. I met Melvyn that first night, when I went backstage. I didn't like him very much. It's very funny, but with both of them I started out not liking them. I'm devoted to Melvyn, actually.

Fry: What did you not like about Melvyn?

De Sola: I thought he was a cold fish.

Fry: Oh, really?

De Sola: Yes. He acted like one. He acted very much the way I acted when I first went to college. [Laughs] You know, remote. As he told me afterwards, he was that way. He's very introverted. In their marriage, they both gave so much to each other. Helen's openness and outgoingness--which is really remarkable, when you think of all the repressions--it opened Melvyn up. He's outgoing now, too. I mean, I don't think the way she is, but in some ways, more honest about himself than Helen could ever be. She's still a little affected by the childhood and girlhood she had.

Melvyn told me himself that he hadn't trusted people, and that through her, he learned to do so. He not only trusted her, he learned to trust a lot of other people. At the same time, Helen got from him a sort of--what should I call it?--an intellectual clarity. Melvyn has a very fine mind, I think. She got over this juvenile idea, "Look! I can be anything I want to be!" All that sort of fairytale belief about herself.

I don't think that, without Melvyn, she would have ever gone into politics, for instance. He wanted to, and intended to. Even in 1940 I remember, before the war, he was being groomed here for it. Then the war came and he enlisted. And then, since they'd

De Sola: both been active in California, she went into politics. But he was the one who was meant for that.

Fry: Yes, and he did contribute a lot to politics in California.

De Sola: Oh, he did, he did. But he never ran for office, something he regretted. He once told me that his ambition had been to make enough money as an actor and director so he could forget about money and just devote himself to politics. This was in the thirties.

Fry: What did you just say about his being "groomed" for office?

De Sola: I don't remember the details. Just that this man who founded PM and a couple of other behind-the-scenes biggies were very interested in backing Melvyn for office.

Fry: In New York?

De Sola: I'm sort of vague about that, unfortunately, but Melvyn can tell you more about it. I do remember meeting these people in New York, and they all thought he would make a splendid candidate; they were going to back him with everything they had. At that time, I don't think anybody, including Helen, ever thought about her going into politics. She had so many theatrical abilities, what with singing and acting, too, that I don't think it ever occurred to her that she might leave all that and go into politics.

Fry: I wonder how Melvyn felt about Helen being the one who became the candidate then. Did you ever get any glimpse of that?

De Sola: I've always felt there's a little sore spot there. When I was living with them in Hollywood in the thirties--that's when Helen was doing She, and Melvyn was between pictures--we used to have long, long talks. Melvyn told me he'd always felt that an actor wasn't very much of a person. He said everybody connected with the theater had contributed something to it except actors--all they cared about was whether they had a big part. I think this isn't true, but he really didn't have much respect for them. I think he has much more regard now for the profession of acting than he did then. I mean, he thought directing was good, he thought writing was wonderful, but he felt the actor never saw the play as a whole because he only saw himself. And that's why he wanted to get out of it. He was already getting out of it, in the sense that he was directing plays--which he did a number of times and very well, including Dan Tothoroh's play about the Brönte sisters, which I spoke about earlier. But I have gotten this feeling later, after he came back from the war. After all, he was four years away I think. He's never quite said he regretted not being the candidate; it's just an intimation.

She

- Fry: Going back to when Helen was in She, the film, in Hollywood, how long did you visit them?
- De Sola: That was in '35. I would say six or seven months. We left New York early in January, and I stayed until the end of June, I think.
- Fry: At that particular time, Helen had not yet started to be interested in the migrant workers who came to California.
- De Sola: No, that was after I left.
- Fry: She was still purely in the theater, and at that time was attempting Hollywood.
- De Sola: She'd finished She, and we did a lot of things. We went out into the desert and whatnot. She got control over her scripts and she didn't like any of the ones they offered her. She was a ghastly script by the way. Helen looked wonderful in it, and created a character, but the lines were just atrocious!
- Fry: Did Helen change them?
- De Sola: Well, we used to work on that in her dressing room a bit, just changing them so they were sayable. You couldn't really change much. When I saw the film again last winter--my God! It was even worse than I remembered! It's a horrible picture! [Laughs]
- Fry: I missed it, but in Helen's files the costumes look spectacular. And the sets?
- De Sola: They were both beautiful, and she looked like a million dollars. I remember she used to go early to the studio and get made up and all that, though actually she needed very little makeup.
- Fry: Did she?
- De Sola: You know, she had wonderful skin. I would walk to the studio, and get there around the time they started shooting. But once I was delayed; I guess it was a nice day, and I didn't walk as fast. Anyway, when I got there, she was already on the set being shot. She was walking down this tremendous flight of stairs in one of these lovely costumes, and I was absolutely horrified! Here were the lights focussed on her from both sides, and you could see every pore on her body!
- Fry: You mean a completely transparent costume?

De Sola: Completely...There's a story in that, too. When we arrived in Hollywood, the costumes for She were ready. They were designed by Aline Bernstein who'd "dressed" Helen before and knew just what would suit both her and the part. Merian C. Cooper, who produced and directed the picture, had approved them, incidentally, but that was before he met Helen. Once he did, he told Aline, "I want them more sexy." What that meant was removing layer after layer of material. Helen ended up with just one layer of chiffon between her and the world. [Laughs]

In the finished picture, she didn't look naked because the lights crossed each other. But there on the set, you could see everything. And everybody just gaped--the dozens of people you always find on a movie lot--cameramen, "grips," script editors, a clutch of assistant directors. When I told Helen afterward, she said, "Why didn't you scream?" Of course, it was too late. And I did admire the way she sailed down that long flight of steps. [Laughs] Quite serene and unselfconscious. As queenly as could be!

Fry: If she'd known, it would have ruined the whole scene. [Laughs]

De Sola: It was funny. At the same time, she was so beautiful--and so detached about her beauty. I remember...at the end of every day, we'd all look at the rushes, a rough cut of the scenes shot that day. In one of them, the hero comes to--he'd been knocked unconscious--and finds this woman leaning over him, Helen, and they devised this very interesting effect. Gradually, as his eyes clear, her face becomes bigger and bigger, until it fills the whole screen. Like the rest of us, Helen leaned forward. "God, that's beautiful!" she said. [Laughs]

Fry: Oh, that's great.

De Sola: It tickled me, how unselfconscious she was.

Fry: Not vain?

De Sola: No! She was completely unvain. Let me tell you another Hollywood story. You know all those fan magazines. They'd been playing up Helen and She a lot, and they were curious to get a first-hand look at this legendary Broadway and opera star. So, finally, the studio arranged a sort of group interview for about a dozen of the fan mag reporters.

Now, when Helen wasn't actively doing something, she could usually be found in bed. And that's where she received the reporters, most of whom were men.

Fry: In bed?

De Sola: In bed. With cold cream on her face and her hair in curlers. The reporters were absolutely stunned. They'd never seen a star in such a condition before--couldn't believe their eyes at first. But, after the first shock, everybody relaxed and the interview went quite well. [Laughs] Helen could look more undressed than anybody I've ever known. Listen, would you like a drink?

Fry: I'd love some water. [Tape turned off and restarted]

De Sola: You don't mind my leaping back and forth in time?

Fry: No. I think we're tracking in themes, anyway. I've been wanting to ask you how you happened to be in California at that time (1935) and what you were doing there.

De Sola: Helen asked me to go out with her. Melvyn was in a play and couldn't leave New York. She was bothered by the script of She. She said, "I can't say those lines. Maybe you'll rewrite them for me." I myself had no business in Hollywood--well, a bit, maybe. I'd just finished writing a play, a collaboration with a well-known Broadway playwright, Kenyon Nicholson. The play was my idea, stimulated by my first experience in a political campaign, the La Guardia campaign for mayor of New York City.

Political Activist: 1930s and 1940s

Fry: What was the name of the play?

De Sola: It had several--Turncoat was one. Another was A Preface to Albany. But it never got produced. Though it was optioned quite a few times, it somehow didn't make it. Anyway, one thing I was planning to do in Hollywood was to see if I couldn't find an actor to play the male lead in this play. The role was that of a Tammany Irishman who saw how the wind was blowing and switched to the Fusion Party in '33, the year La Guardia was elected. He was, in other words, a political pro, a Tammany hack who found himself associated with a group of rather amateurish and very idealistic reformers, among them an attractive and sophisticated young woman. Her husband's the local candidate for New York State Assembly but she falls in love with Mike, the Irishman, and he with her. It was a comedy, almost a farce, but not quite. You see, there was this contrast in their ethics, their personal and public ethics. His were very rigid, very Catholic, on the personal side, while lax politically. Hers were the other way around.

De Sola: What we envisioned for the part of Mike was a big tough "black Irish" type, and there was nobody on Broadway at the time who fitted this description. So my mission was to find him. [Laughs] It was rather fun. I got all these handsome actors to read for me, and I'd read the woman's part. I felt like a big-shot producer, dangling a juicy role before all these good-looking men. Among them was John Lodge. He was a Boston Brahmin, rather stiff-mannered but he looked the part perfectly--tall and dark with bold black eyes. Well, he and I had a little flutter, one of those instant Hollywood romances, and the next thing was I wired Nick and John Golden, the producer who held the option then, that I'd found the perfect Mike. They wired back--both of them signed the telegram--"Are you nuts?" [Laughs] But all that was secondary--the "talent hunt," I mean. I wouldn't have gone to Hollywood just for that. I went because Helen asked me to.

Fry: Were you with the Douglasses at all during that brief period when they were in Carmel?

De Sola: No.

Fry: Did your paths cross in the theater world?

De Sola: No.

Fry: Not in the legitimate theater at all?

De Sola: Where the theater was concerned, our paths never crossed; they ran parallel. It was Kenyon Nicholson, with whom I took a play-writing course at Columbia, who got me started, and with whom I worked, off and on, for many years. You see, he liked the way I wrote and asked me to collaborate with him on a one-act play, one designed for amateur groups (quite a big business in those years) --and produced over and over again. Incidentally, my own play, Panic, which I submitted for Nick's course, was put on by a very good semi-professional company, the Scarborough Players. It led to a lot of other things, including "doctoring" plays for Nick and other people, too. But Turncoat was my first attempt to think through, and write, what I considered a genuinely commercial play. I'd also worked with Nick on a war play--one which made Broadway but flopped....Come to think of it, I've done quite a lot of theater, but nothing really distinguished. You see, I also got married. I keep forgetting about that, because it's behind me so completely! But, in a way, it caused a sort of separation from Helen. I was about twenty-three, I guess, when I got married. I remained married seven years, more or less. That loused up my career in more ways than one! Really, the sort of tinkering that I did in the theater was an attempt to keep my hand in more than anything else.

Helen and Melvyn: Family and Politics

Fry: You didn't have much to do with her political career?

De Sola: Nothing at all.

Fry: And then she and Mel moved back to New York.

De Sola: That's right, and that's when we picked up our old friendship again, when she came back here after Nixon defeated her...when they both came back, in the early fifties.

Fry: What sort of activities did that friendship include? Or did you just visit back and forth socially?

De Sola: It was a personal relationship, more than anything else. Very close and very candid. It's a curious thing. I've never been professionally associated with her, oh, except for a while when I was in Hollywood and a little later I did do some publicity for her. Little stories. I don't know if I've any left, because all these universities that want her effects have got several of them.

Fry: She probably has them deposited at Norman, Oklahoma.

De Sola: Yes, I think so. I may have one left, if that's useful to you. It's the way I felt about her at the time. I don't know exactly where it is, but if it's where I think it is, it's easy to get. [Goes off in search. Tape turned off and restarted]

Fry: You did these as publicity to precede her as she went to give concerts? Is that it?

De Sola: Yes. The stories would appear in local papers, wherever her schedule took her. I think I did, altogether, about half a dozen of them--I don't remember too well.

Fry: Then, afterwards, after her congressional career, when you were with her socially, did you get any indication from her on how she felt about having been trounced by Nixon in the way that she was?

De Sola: Yes, I did. "You know, I was so angry but, curiously enough," she said, "I have to admit that he did me a favor." She said, "After Melvyn came back, I really would have liked to quit and let him take over--he's the one that always wanted the job--but, when you get into politics, you can't do it." She said, "It was just as though I had a tiger by the tail and couldn't let go. I let go to a certain extent by running for the Senate." She would've been re-elected, of course, to her old seat in the House.

De Sola: She felt that it was wise for her to challenge the incumbent Democratic senator, who was Sheridan Downey, because he had had some not-very-honest connections, I gather, with the agribusinesses and water interests and all of that. She won the primary from him, but then in the election itself Nixon unloosed this really unsavory campaign.

She said, "I was getting very upset about my family. We were scattered all over the place. The children were in school, Melvyn was in Hollywood, I was in Washington. We were breaking apart." Her family has always meant a great deal to her. I mean, it did when she was a child and she feels the same way about her current family. She is definitely a person with a strong feeling for family--more than most of us, really.

Fry: Her own family background had been very together.

De Sola: Yes. She has two surviving brothers. One lives way down in South Carolina somewhere. She doesn't see him much, but her younger brother lives near her in Vermont. She's very, very close to him, as she had been earlier with her sister, who died.

Fry: How did that affect her, the death of her sister?

De Sola: A lot. She was very, very fond of her. Lilly looked a little like Helen, except on a much more reduced scale.

Fry: I've seen her pictures.

De Sola: I was always sorry for her, in a way. She was just my age, actually, though she was not in my class. It was Helen who was. She said once, "I always inherit everything from Helen--her beaux, her clothes, her everything!" I think that's why she left college at nineteen and got married because her husband was the first beau she hadn't inherited!

[end tape 1, side B; begin tape 2, side A]

De Sola: Helen was with her sister just before she died in Palm Beach.

Fry: She died of cancer, right?

De Sola: Liver cancer, too, which is particularly horrid. I know. My oldest friend also died of that a few years ago.

Fry: That's terrible. Did Helen's family get back together, do you think, after she was no longer in Congress?

De Sola: Oh, yes. That's when they all moved to New York. Her son, Peter,

De Sola: went to Columbia University here. He was a little detached from them, while his sister, Mary, always loved her parents' friends. She had such a good time with them. Peter was disillusioned with them. I think now he likes us better than he did before. When he was a little boy growing up, I don't think he cared for the whole theatrical world.

Mary was different. When she went off to college in Chicago, I bade her a fond farewell. But the next week, when I phoned it was Mary who answered. I said, "What in hell are you doing here?"

She said, "You know, I sat there in Chicago, and I thought, 'I can learn much more in New York from all of my parents' wonderful friends than I can possibly learn here, so I decided to quit.'"

Fry: [Laughs] I guess Helen really did have a lot of the common ordinary problems that parents are always facing.

De Sola: Oh, she did. Peter was a very difficult person when he was growing up.

Fry: Well, if he didn't care for theatrical people when he was growing up, in the middle of Hollywood, I can see that he had problems!

De Sola: Yes. Oh, and he kept being kicked out of schools or leaving them. I don't know just what it was, but he had a terrible time. They were very worried about him. I mean, he's been fine since his marriage. He married this girl who was studying nursing while he was at Columbia. Their dormitories sort of backed on each other. They met through a window.

Fry: That was before the days when you had coed dorms?

De Sola: Well, they weren't really in the same institution. She was at Saint Luke's Hospital, and he was at Columbia University. Anyway, she was, I think, a farmer's daughter from way out on Long Island, a very sane gal, by the way. She's now a nurse-anesthetist. I think she did a great deal for Peter, I really do. Very calm-- just what all the Douglasses and Gahagans are not, Janey is!

Fry: [Laughs] I hope she survives them!

De Sola: I have a lot of admiration for her. She's gone back to work. Their youngest child is about eight or nine. She gave up work when he was a baby. As for Peter, he's now a lay analyst.

Fry: I knew that he was some kind of clinical psychologist.

De Sola: He began as a social worker. You couldn't get further away from the theater than that. He took a degree in that field. Then he went to the William Alanson White Institute, I think as a patient, an analysand. He became interested and took some training courses. His specialty is psychotics. They're the difficult ones. And he's very good with them.

Fry: Here's a list of Helen's post-Congressional activities. You might just want to glance through that and see if something rings a bell or brings an anecdote to mind, or a comment.

De Sola: Now why didn't I see First Lady? Where was I then? I know about her becoming involved with the family firm, and going to South America and the Middle East and all that. I know she still did concerts. I know she went on a tour with Basil Rathbone. As a matter of fact, she read one of my stories, which is written in the first person, on that tour.

Fry: What was that?

De Sola: It was called "She Died Young," with the title coming from that Elizabethan play--[quoting] "Cover her face...mine eyes dazzle... she died young."

Fry: Where did you publish the story?

De Sola: In a magazine. Also, later, in a collection.

Fry: In which magazine?

De Sola: I think College Humor, of all places. No, it was the American Mercury. [Tape turned off and restarted]

Fry: I'd like to include some of the reviews of your collection of stories, The Body is Faithful [N.Y.: Dutton, 1947], in the appendix, especially because it shows how upset some of the male reviewers got about your writing.

An Idea: Melvyn as Ferdinand Lassalle

Fry: You wrote a play about Ferdinand Lassalle?

De Sola: Yes. That's the one I wanted Melvyn to play the lead in. The reviews--I thought they were in this book, and I don't see them. This is one, but it's in Spanish. You wouldn't want that. My parents' birthplace gave me a full-page review, you see.

De Sola: parents' birthplace gave me a full-page review, you see.

Fry: Is that an illustration from the book?

De Sola: No, they just put it in. [Reading] "A Great Yankee-Venezuelan Writer." [Laughs]

Fry: Hometown--home country girl makes good?

De Sola: That's right. At that time, I'd never even been in Venezuela, however.

These reviews I'm giving you were xeroxed for the foreign editions of the book. They're the most interesting ones, I think. In any case, the others are crumbling, as you can see.

Fry: In your play about this German labor leader, Lassalle, what was its theme? Would you mind covering that because this was the role you thought Melvyn could do so well.

De Sola: He would've been magnificent, exactly right--in temperament, in age, even in appearance. Lassalle was a towering figure in the history of the mid-nineteenth century, a greatly gifted human being who combined an outstanding intellect--he was a philosopher, a playwright, a lawyer, as well as a revolutionary--with the kind of charismatic personality that attracts followers, seemingly without effort. These included members of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia, in addition to the working people whom he served so effectively. They literally idolized him, and with good reason.

But he was a "lost leader," a man destroyed by a tragic flaw in himself before his capacity for greatness was fully realized--he was only thirty-nine when he died, as the result of a duel he need never have fought. It is the events leading up to that duel--the last two months of his life--with which the play is concerned.

Fry: What was it called?

De Sola: Before High Heaven. It's taken from the Duke's speech, in Act II of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, the one that reads--I'm quoting partially--"...but man, proud man!

.....
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep."

Fry: You told me earlier that Herman Shumlin was going to produce it, right? Or direct it?

De Sola: No. No, I just submitted it to him, and I guess he rather liked it, but he said, "I can't do a play like that." At the time, I didn't know why he couldn't do it but I've found out since. This was at the height of the McCarthy era and Herman had, I've been told, a radical past. So it would've been foolish of him to get mixed up with a play about a man who was a notorious revolutionary, a friend of Karl Marx. As a matter of fact, the play was never produced, partly because I got bad advice from my agents--they said to hold it until after the war--and partly because I was so involved in my first government job.

Fry: Was that your Voice of America job?

De Sola: No, it was at Inter-American Affairs, during the war. You see, I wrote the Lassalleplay just before the war, but I didn't really finish it until '42. By that time, Melvyn was off in the Pacific somewhere.

As soon as the war was over I left Inter-American Affairs. Two years later, I was recruited into the Voice of America.

You see, during the war we were talking to free countries. Anyway, Nelson Rockefeller was our chief, the coordinator. We had lovely quarters on Madison Avenue, with balconies all around, stone balconies. We could spend a fortune on our productions. We really had first-class productions, plays and things like that.

At the Voice, on the other hand, they were so penny-pinching! The idea was that, now that the whole world was free, their productions had to be as good as ours had been, but that isn't what happened. Sure, they had some very interesting programs but mainly they were cheap versions of what we'd been doing at Inter-American Affairs. I found it very disappointing.

Then I was put in charge of the programs to Latin America at the Voice. That was during the McCarthy era. I never got involved. I still don't know why, since I was such a flaming liberal. I not only got through [Joseph P.] McCarthy unscathed, but the year before, [Bourke B.] Hickenlooper--who was a Republican too--had conducted a detailed investigation of the Voice, asking for scripts by the pound. I came through that one okay, too.

Fry: So you were never called up before the McCarthy committee?

De Sola: Never. And that was odd because so many of my subordinates were McCarthy informers: the writers--not all of them, but a lot of them--a producer, a director. It was pretty horrible. But then there was this man from the State Department, who was almost the only

De Sola: brave executive we had there. My God! What a bunch of weak sisters we had!

Fight for Freedom Committee

Fry: We don't have on tape your lurid background, like getting picked up by the police when you were talking for Fight for Freedom before the war.

De Sola: That's true. The New York police force in '41 was largely, I would say maybe eighty percent Irish...and it was a pretty reactionary force. I never thought so, what with being married to a Skelly. The police always liked me very much.

Fry: You used the name Skelly?

De Sola: When I was married, I did. I wasn't divorced until '42, though I was separated from my husband before that. I mean technically, it was my name! [Laughs]

Fry: Could you tell this story on tape, about this picture that is headlined "Heckler Leaves Rally By [they call it] Request."

De Sola: By request! [Laughs] That picture's torn too, I see.

Fry: We'll see if we can reproduce it.

De Sola: Look at those open mouths! That was really funny.

Fry: This was at a meeting of what?

De Sola: Of the America First Committee. They were having a rally at a Masonic hall at the far end of Staten Island. We'd heard that Hamilton Fish and Gerald P. Nye, who were both very opposed to U.S. help for the allies, were going to be speaking there. We decided to give them a run for their money. About six of us went out by ferry and bus all the way out to the end of Staten Island.

I was appalled by the atmosphere from the beginning. I mean, I'd never really thought of how shockingly the America Firsters imitated Italian Fascism and German Nazism. There was a priest there who gave the most shocking benediction I ever heard! [Laughs] The adrenalin started to flow in me right then, before the main program even began. I mean, he made such vicious remarks about [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt, implying sexual inadequacy and

De Sola: whatnot. I mean this was a priest, God help us! And he was saying that the only Americans who were good Americans were like the people in that hall there, and he blessed all this multitude of people, who were sieg heiling away like mad.

I was particularly annoyed because, just about ten days before, I was involved in a very unpleasant accident. Well, not accident. It was deliberate. We'd been at Columbus Circle a whole week--for a sort of tribute to all the captive countries. Each night there was a different one. Incidentally, that was also when I started divorce proceedings. These were meetings for the countries that had been overrun by the Nazis. I was chairman of the meeting one night. We'd built a platform there. One of the people up there with me, whom I just met, was a lawyer. I thought, "Really, it's time I got my divorce!" [Laughter] My husband was in the army. We'd been separated quite a long time before. One reason I left him was that he was a fascist--not consciously--but by temperament, by nature. It just welled out of him. He believed in all that nonsense. He never read about it, he wasn't interested in politics. He was interested in the army. He'd been in the National Guard for many years and transferred to the regular army.

He had called to say that he was being sent to Puerto Rico, and did I still want a divorce? I said I sure did. You see, I couldn't do it before, because the New York divorce laws were so strict.

Fry: It was only for proven adultery, wasn't it?

De Sola: Proven adultery. By this time, he was willing to set up a scene in a hotel.

I thought, here's this lawyer. "Will you do it?" I asked. He said yes. I said, "Okay, I'm engaging you right this minute."

Meanwhile, we'd accumulated, during that week we spent at Columbus Circle, a lot of tough boys from the neighborhood. I don't think they gave a damn about the politics, they just liked us. They set themselves up as our defenders and protectors because they were against the police, and the police were against us.

Fry: So it put the boys on your side?

De Sola: Yes. After that week was over, we went back to our usual routine. These boys used to follow us around and stand there like gang boys. Teenagers, most of them, but being very nice to us! Once some America Firsters tried to overturn our car, and these boys marched

De Sola: right in and kept us from being turned over! I mean, we had reason to be grateful to them.

This particular night, on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street, there'd been quite an exciting evening. Incidentally, we always broke up at eleven and went home. It's funny, you always feel anonymous in New York, no matter how much you speak in public. Well, that night, as I was getting on the subway to go back to Brooklyn, where I was living temporarily with my parents, this elderly couple came up to me and said they'd heard me talk several times, and they agreed with me, and how wonderful I was. Well, I went home with quite a glow, you know.

The next morning, the Fight for Freedom Committee called me up. "We don't want you going home alone again," they said. "Something terrible happened last night." Evidently, they said, right after we left and the police left, the audience started arguing, as usual, among themselves. And it happened that that night there'd been a rally in Carnegie Hall by a group of Italian Fascists. When the rally was over, the group marched towards Fifth Avenue, where our people were still talking. The Italians got into a big row with our group and those gang boys from Columbus Circle were mocking the Italians. One of them hit this boy and punched out his eye. He said, "And that goes especially for that damn woman who talks!" Whom he identified as me. Well! Then one of the other boys put out both this man's eyes! This was a pretty horrible thing to happen.

I was never afraid of dying, but I was always afraid of losing my eyesight. It scared me to death! But the next night I still went home alone because I knew that, if I didn't, I'd never get up on a soapbox again! [Laughs]

I was practical with myself. I didn't have much money, since I wasn't working. There was always a taxi at the subway station when I got out. If it was midnight, I took it. If it was a quarter to twelve, I'd walk home. I had a long walk. Well, that next night there was a taxi and it was one minute after midnight. I had every right to take it, but I said, "If I don't walk home, I'll be scared the rest of my life." So I walked home, about eight blocks through a residential, very deserted section.

Suddenly it occurred to me: My God, if those nice people who'd talked to me the night before could recognize me, those nasty people could recognize me, too! It was one of the times of my life that I was really afraid, scared to death. When I arrived home, I was perspiring like mad. But I got over the fear.

Fry: You did?

De Sola: Yes, I did. I said to myself that it wouldn't be likely. This was a horrible thing to happen, but look at all the other nuts who go around, and nothing happens.

Anyway, this whole situation was very fresh in my mind when I went out to Staten Island. This Italian priest--remember, it had been Italians who had started this--just enraged me. So, instead of waiting for Gerald Nye, I started heckling Hamilton Fish.

He'd say something, and I'd say something back. At first he tried to ignore me, but he couldn't. Finally he said, "Throw that woman out!" My seatmates, who'd been handing me all this literature and being so nice to me--they thought they had a new recruit--[laughs] looked at me as though I'd stabbed them.

[end tape 2, side A; begin tape 2, side B]

One of them dragged me into the aisle. I made him take his hands off me because I said that I'd arrest him--and the police agreed that I could--if he didn't take his hands off. And they--the police couldn't do anything either, because I really committed no crime. I was just expressing my feelings in a democratic manner! [Laughter] Though they'd have loved to kick me out, they just stood there with those stiff faces. So that's the background of the picture.

After I'd carefully torn apart every piece of their literature and sprinkled it on the floor, I said, "I have nothing left to say," and walked out to a movie theater at the corner. Evidently the Staten Island Advance reporter had taken this picture of me, while I was in full spate, as it were. He followed me to the corner and invited me over to his office. He said, "Our office is right here. Come and have a cup of coffee."

I said, "How do I know you're from the Staten Island Advance? How do I know you're not one of those characters in there?"

He said, "Well, let me send you the story anyway." I said fine, and gave him my address. He stayed talking to me for twenty minutes or so. Then I stayed all alone for another hour, and then somebody else from our group was kicked out. We waited until we were all out, and then we went home together. [Laughter]

As I was telling you, I once arrested a man on Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue. Fortunately, my mother was away that time; she was scared to death about my Fight for Freedom activities. She didn't really know how much was going on, she just didn't like the idea of my speaking on street corners.

Fry: You had made a citizen's arrest?

De Sola: I made it, but everybody was just ignoring me! Finally the police took this man to the station house. Along with half the audience, I walked to the Mercer Street Station. (No, I took a cab with the lawyer who was on our committee, but the audience followed us.) [Laughs] We get to Mercer Street, and here's a whole pack of people, all ready to testify for me! [Laughter] I was taken aside by the lieutenant there and asked to drop the charge. I said I wouldn't.

Fry: This man had been shouting obscenities and so forth at your speech?

De Sola: Yes, really in a horrible way. Also, his pals were pushing our people around. It was a disagreeable thing. They were not supposed to do it. That's what the police were for, to stop that sort of thing. But they just vanished, as soon as the trouble started. They were at fault, and they knew they were at fault. I said to the lieutenant, "Moreover, I'm going to add a charge that the police were derelict in their duty." At that time, I used to write to the commissioner of police regularly. [Laughter]

Fry: Their best correspondent.

De Sola: Saying that so-and-so, badge number so-and-so did this and the other. I found out later that that's much more effective than complaining. If they just did their duty of keeping control of the situation, which is nothing beyond and above their call of duty, then I'd write a letter and say that that officer so-and-so, badge number so-and-so, did his duty. That impressed Commissioner [Lewis J.] Valentine no end. I always got an answer, too! [Laughs]

Fry: Let's see, we have you at the police station with the crowd ready to testify, and you refused to drop the charge.

De Sola: Yes. And, because I refused to drop the charge, we all had to go to night court, which was way over on the West Side, on Fifty-Ninth Street. I said, "Okay, I'll go to night court." The man I arrested had to go to night court, too. Everybody had to go to night court, including my audience--some of them came, too. You know, people were awfully nice in those days, to go out of their way to the extent they did, just to support you! On the way to the night court, the lawyer said, "Now listen, don't get angry." [Laughter] "When the judge calls you, say 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,' to him and don't go beyond that! He's going to ask you questions, and that's all you're supposed to say." I said, "That's going to be difficult for me." He said, "I know. But do it!"

De Sola: When I got to night court, I was taken by--I don't know who it was that took me aside to a separate room--and again asked me to drop the charges. I refused. Sure enough, the judge, who was an Italian--I thought, "Oh God! Another Italian!"--said, "What happened to you?" I explained just what had happened. I said I'd made a citizen's arrest, which interested him. I think he didn't know that people knew about citizen's arrests. The La Guardia people had taught me that, and then my friend at the Rand School had also impressed it on our minds that we could do this.

Otherwise, I was good. I'd say, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." The judge, damn his soul, decided to drop the charge of inciting to racial violence and calling the president a heap of manure. What he was not going to drop, he said, was the fact that this man had thrown me at a Nedick stand....you know, the orange drink place.

He said, "I can't have young women being thrown around the streets of New York." I'll always remember that phrase! [Laughs] If he hadn't done that, I wouldn't have had a case. So he said that we were to appear at Jefferson Market Court (I don't understand about all these courts and police stations!) the next morning at ten. Meanwhile, he was going to jail the man, unless he had bail, and he didn't, so he was in jail all night. The next morning, he was given a week's sentence, but it was cancelled. What's the word they use?

Fry: Suspended?

De Sola: A suspended sentence. Since he'd already spent one night in jail, and had brought his brother along to say he was a very respectable German-American. The worst of it was that there was this item in the paper about him, and they gave his name with my address!

Fry: Oh, no. [Laughter]

De Sola: Somebody on the force goofed. It was in all the papers. When my father saw it the next day, he said, "How come?"

I said, "I don't know. It's a mistake." I never told him anything about it. He was sound asleep, he didn't know. My mother would've been waiting up with a batch of policemen, ready to rescue me from a fate worse than death.

Fry: Did you and Helen Gahagan Douglas ever discuss your political activism?

De Sola: We didn't discuss it until long afterwards, after the war. In fact, not till she came back to New York to live.

Fry: Did you agree or disagree on political issues?

De Sola: Basically, we agreed on political issues. Our differences were minor. But we developed our opinions independently of each other.

Fry: After the Voice of America, you had an offer to go to Radio Free Europe.

De Sola: Yes, but the Hungarian Revolution in the fall of 1956 caused the offer to be withdrawn. The program never came into existence, actually. Instead, I went to work for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. I stayed fourteen years.

Fry: I thought it was interesting that Radio Free Europe had offered you the job of being in charge of cultural programs for the intellectuals in Europe.

De Sola: Yes.

Fry: That sort of shows what your--

De Sola: I would've covered the theater, art galleries, concerts, opera... all the things I like to do anyway, so it would've really been a dream job--with a very good salary for those days.

Fry: Too bad. So then you went to Muscular Dystrophy?

De Sola: I stayed, rather, because I was working there on a temporary basis already.

Fry: And began your new career in science?

De Sola: Well, I didn't begin in science. I began in--what shall I say--public relations--public information--which I knew from the days of the Voice and the days of Inter-American Affairs. But I did begin reading scientific articles.

Fry: It took you into medicine and biology, right?

De Sola: Biology particularly. I began to meet a lot of scientists and I soon became very interested. It wasn't a fake thing. I really got absorbed in the subject, and then I began to write about it, though not immediately.

I started writing a feature which I called Notes from the Research Front, and later expanded these "notes" into articles on

De Sola: research projects. The Muscular Dystrophy Association has about thirty diseases to deal with. It should have changed its name years ago, but felt it had something, a sort of trademark. [Laughs] Which it has, I suppose. MDA deals with a great many diseases, very serious ones. Mostly genetic--not all of them, but mostly. All very serious, like Lou Gehrig's disease--"amyotrophic lateral sclerosis," which is a disease of adults--just about the most ghastly thing that can happen to anybody. I mean, the only thing that isn't affected is the mind.

Fry: How terrible.

De Sola: Awful!

Miscellaneous Reflections on Helen Gahagan Douglas

Standing-In: Award from the American Jewish Congress

Fry: I have three stories here to pick up about Helen. One was about your receiving an award for her.

De Sola: Yes. For some reason, she couldn't be there on that day.

Fry: The Jewish Women's Congress.

De Sola: They asked me to come to this luncheon and accept the award in her name, which I did. I took it home to her. I've forgotten what the award was, but I remember packages. [Laughs]

Fry: My notes say The Louise Waterman Wise Award of the American Jewish Congress, Women's Division, in 1968.

De Sola: Right.

Fry: Now, while you were there, you told me that you'd told a story.

De Sola: Well, I had to say a few words about her. I said, "You know, I think it's right that you're giving Helen this award, because she always had the odd idea that she was a descendant of one of those ten lost tribes of Israel." When we were young, there was some story that it was to the British Isles that they went. I mean, there was just a touch of reality! [Laughs]

Fry: And it was when Helen was in college that she was convinced of this. [Laughter]

De Sola: They thought that was delightful, since they liked her anyway. I talked for about five minutes, that's all.

Greek Games at Barnard

Fry: Another college story about her is her participation in the Greek games at Barnard.

De Sola: Yes. There was nothing very funny about that, but we both participated. I'm trying to think what guild she represented the year I was the potters' head. I can't remember, but maybe she'll remember. You see, we represented all the guilds of Athens, and Athena was their tutelary goddess. We brought her the finest specimens of our different crafts. These spectacles were really something.

Fry: They must have been quite elaborate.

De Sola: I remember the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson came during our freshman year. In the entrance, which is the dramatic part of the games, the entire class participated. Afterward, in the athletic events and the poetry and all that, it's individual. But the whole class is involved to start with.

Fry: In the cast of the pageant?

De Sola: Yes, the pageant. When we all came in, in our Greek costumes, some of us dressed as men and some as women. The athletes were all dressed as men; I was a hoop-roller. [Laughs heartily]

Fry: A what?

De Sola: A hoop-roller! Having rolled hoops in my childhood--nobody else had, but in Europe that was quite the thing, and I'd spent a lot of time in Europe. Our class won both years. I even broke my arm doing it. I was running around the oval during practice session when somebody knocked me down and broke my arm. Since I was such a good hoop-roller, I could practice with my arm in a sling. I was still on the team. [Laughs]

But when we came on, Léonie Adams, was assigned to escort Edwin Arlington Robinson. (Remember the famous Adams family? Léonie is really a very fine poet, like the metaphysical poets of

- De Sola: England, that sort of writer.) Anyway, she said that when the classes came in, from different sides of the gymnasium, he took a deep breath and said, "Wow!" [Laughs]
- Fry: Helen had the lead in the dramatic production?
- De Sola: In the drama. A youth--the part she played--had somehow offended Neptune. I don't remember how. I remember his name. It was Atis. [Spells it]
- Fry: That's who she played?
- De Sola: Yes. I remember she was carried in on the shoulders of her fellow citizens of Athens.

The next year, we had a different type of opening. It was not so dramatic, but it was more interesting in a way, because we were able to show the great variety of skills that were in existence in Athens at the time.

Campaigning for McGovern; Comments on Watergate

- Fry: When you helped Helen campaign in the McGovern-for-President campaign in 1972 in New Hampshire and Vermont--
- De Sola: I didn't really help campaign. I just went along. If somebody asked me questions, I'd answer them. I mean I wasn't, strictly speaking, campaigning. It wasn't my territory, and I thought I might make a mistake because I didn't know these people. Unless I was asked something, I didn't say anything at these kafee klatsches where we'd get into general conversation. I just went around, because I wanted to see what that sort of campaigning was like, in contrast with the type I was familiar with--urban campaigns-- [Laughter] La Guardia, and Roosevelt--much excitement all over the place, and huge crowds.
- Fry: You say you had been trained to encourage hecklers. Did Helen have many hecklers? How did the audience respond to her?
- De Sola: No, she didn't have many hecklers. In fact, I never saw one. I remember thinking that I didn't think I'd have been good at it. It would have bored me. [Laughter] You know, in a campaign, you say basically the same thing wherever you go. Not the same words, if you're ad-libbing, but basically. What else have you got to say? Hecklers make it interesting and allow you to get in a few cracks.

Fry: Did Helen have her speech written out?

De Sola: A lot of them she had. Not always. I've seen her talk without any notes at all. I've always felt that she felt more comfortable without notes. I may be wrong--but I kept urging her to drop them; she really is an excellent ad-lib speaker.

Fry: You felt that she was better ad-libbing?

De Sola: To me, it seemed much better. But she said, "Well, I forget things." I said, "It doesn't matter if you forget things. What matters is the impression you make."

Fry: This was twenty-two years after her last campaign for office.

De Sola: That was in 1950. Twenty-two years.

Fry: How did the crowd respond to her as a figure? Did they still remember her?

De Sola: Yes, yes. It's curious. At just that time, suddenly she became a political figure again. I forgot to tell you that. Everybody wanted to interview her. Even up in Vermont, they came. Myra McPherson came from the Washington Post, and Lee Israel came from Ms. and did a beautiful story on her.* Did she show you that?

Fry: We have that Ms. story, and it's beautifully done.

De Sola: That photograph on the cover is marvelous, I think. I know a lot of people who knew her when she was young, who said, "Oh, she's so much better looking now." I said, "This is Helen!"

And other people, too, were constantly calling her up, with mounting interest. God knows how many others. I just happened to be there when those two arrived. You see, Nixon was getting into trouble--incidentally, she talked about Watergate that summer.

Fry: In '72? It had just broken.

De Sola: Nobody made very much of it.

Fry: That's right. It was hardly touched upon.

De Sola: Of course, we didn't know the whole story then.

* Lee Israel, "Helen Gahagan Douglas;" Ms., October, 1973; pp.55+.

Fry: We only knew that the headquarters had been broken into.

De Sola: We knew there was something very phony going on. Helen made a point of it, and even good Republicans there agreed that this was a pretty lousy thing to do. She was able--I don't think she ever really created enemies the way I would have, for instance, because to her Nixon was not an enemy. He was just out to squash her. I don't think he cared about her, one way or the other. He adopted his smear technique because at the time, in California, it was a good technique to destroy her.

Basically, Helen doesn't make enemies. This is the first time I've thought of that, but it's true! She doesn't. I think it's part, again, of her personality--that sort of basic innocence she has and her great sincerity. But also because she's not nasty to people.

Fry: That's right. She's not combative, is she?

De Sola: No, she isn't. That's the curious thing. She isn't. She hasn't got a feel for the jugular at all. She began talking about Nixon only that summer, when all these press interviews started. She didn't say much. Before that, she'd just refused to talk. She said, "What's it going to prove? He damaged me a lot. Naturally, I'm resentful. That's all they'll print, if I say nasty things about him. It's not going to do any good. I might as well be a lady and not say anything."

But that year, 1972, the nastiness of that 1950 campaign was being brought up by a lot of reporters, who remarked how he'd used a lot of the same techniques in 1950, had really tried them out on her--actually, even before, on Jerry Voorhis in '46. Then she said, "Oh, he was always like that."

Fry: Some people feel that she should have spoken out more.

De Sola: I've thought it myself.

Fry: Like in 1960, when Nixon ran against Kennedy. How did you feel about that?

De Sola: I always disliked Nixon, quite apart from what he did to Helen. What he did to Alger Hiss infuriated me. I still think Hiss was framed. I've always thought so, and it gradually seems to be coming out now.

Fry: Yes, we may eventually know more about that.

One of a Kind

De Sola: Remember I told you about in Hollywood, when Helen received the fan magazine press. After that first shock, she was chatting peacefully with them about everything. You know, they got quite used to her; one always does with Helen. They had fun interviewing her. She was written up very nicely... Well, I think it was in '46, or '47, when she was an alternate delegate to the United Nations. The American delegation had its headquarters at the old McAlpin Hotel on 34th Street. I think it's a Statler now. She was being interviewed, as usual. She'd said I should come around three in the afternoon. Here were all these guards and everything-- a very military sort of thing, quite different from Hollywood. As I was led through various corridors, I heard this voice going, a familiar voice! I went to her room. She was in bed, at three o'clock in the afternoon--her hair in curlers, her face slathered with cold cream. [laughter] Whom was she talking to at this point? The New York Times, the New York Herald-Tribune, the New Republic, The Nation--with that same complete unawareness of what an odd figure she was making! [Laughter]

Fry: That's marvelous.

De Sola: Oh, she's an original, you know. She never cared much about her appearance, curiously enough. I mean, I'm sure she liked being beautiful and being admired, but it was not something that was an essential part of herself, as it is for so many beautiful women. When they lose their beauty, you know how stricken they are. For her, it was just a nice face. You like to have it but your life isn't dependent on it. I think that's the real truth about her. It's a very rare attitude for a woman who was once as beautiful and as feted as she was.

Fry: I think it's very difficult for people to take you seriously in something like politics and the United Nations, for instance, if you are a great beauty. I know that so many of the newspaper articles on Helen, in the early days of her congressional career, could hardly talk of anything except that she was a woman, and beautiful, and in Congress.

De Sola: I know. And then Clare Boothe Luce was in Congress at the same time, and there were constant comparisons! It was so silly.

Fry: And yet, Helen had this very important assignment--a lucky one-- to the Foreign Relations Committee, foreign affairs.

De Sola: Yes, and later to the Atomic Energy Committee.

Fry: As time went on, the newspaper stories got more serious about her. I had a feeling, from reading the press, that this had been a tough thing for her to overcome.

De Sola: In Congress, it was. In her district, because she had done all this work for the Steinbeck Committee--you know, for the Okies--the displaced people, the migrant workers. There, she was accepted, and I don't think there was anything made of that. In Congress, certainly there was.

Fry: It's six-thirty! When are your people coming for dinner?

De Sola: Right away, probably.

Fry: We'd better close this off.

Transcriber: Leslie Goodman-Malamuth

Final Typist: Ann Enkoji

HELEN GAHAGAN

June 20, 1944

Dearest Alis:

Thank you, darling, for your letter. I will try to answer your questions, briefly, if you will forgive me. I am crawling out from under a mountain of unanswered mail, and you know how I hate that without my telling you. Isn't it funny you have to do all the things you say you won't do before you die.

What are my chances? It's a two to one Democratic District. I am replacing the Dean of the delegation who is retiring and running at his request. My opponent is a Republican "b" who ran against my predecessor three times and was licked all three times. We all think the chance for success in the finals is very good.

You would love the District. It is a cross section of the whole of America. We have everything. It was lots of fun campaigning, and I wish you were with me. I made so many speeches, they were coming out of my ears. I won the primaries two to one and they threw everything at me they could get their hands on.

I am so happy your work is interesting. Do come to California if you can. We need you.

Mel is doing a marvelous job in the India, Burma, China theatre of war. He seems well and is happy in the work he is able to do. My love to you as always.

Helen

HELEN GANAGAN -- As I Know Her

By Alis de Sola

I always feel a little baffled when I think of her. She is a force of nature, one of those rare human beings in whom life focuses itself, so that there is something irresistible about them, as about a great wind or a charge of electricity. You sense that curious quickening quality the moment she comes into a room, a tall radiant woman with a quite unreasonable beauty and an air of going somewhere very fast.

Her effect on other people is something like that of a very potent cocktail. She makes them feel excited and rather brilliant and as though they, too, were on their way to some astonishing goal. After she leaves, they may wonder just where they did think they were going and what in hell they would have done when they got there but, while it lasts, it's a very pleasant feeling, indeed.

In her case, of course, it isn't just a temporary illusion. She's not only on her way, she has arrived and started elsewhere quite a number of times, driving her team of four careers with marvelous dexterity and a sort of headlong speed. The stage, the opera, the screen and radio have all known her at one time or another, sometimes simultaneously, and now the concert platform is claiming her, too. And, in the midst of all this, she has found time for a completely different kind of a career--the one most women consider quite exhausting enough in itself, marriage--and I'm willing to take my oath in court that it's by far the most satisfactory marriage I have ever encountered.

She seems, literally, inexhaustible, but it is because she knows how to conserve her force. Her energy tends to collapse suddenly when the need for it is over. There is no gradual wearying; one moment she is intensely alive, the next she isn't there at all. If you take the trouble to look, you will find her lying flat on her back somewhere in profound and utter relaxation. As a matter of fact, I have never known anyone who, in the intervals of activity, enjoys the supine posture more. When she isn't working or otherwise engaged, she's usually in bed, whatever time of day it may be. It is, I am firmly convinced, the secret of her energy.

It is also, perhaps, at least partially, the secret of her beauty, of its indestructible quality, that is. Certainly, she doesn't go in for fine unguents or the endless list of beauty aids. A look at her dressing table or bathroom shelves would startle the naive beholder who customarily thinks that actresses need a whole panoply of complex and expensive preparations to keep them looking well. Hers are quite without glamor; they consist of two simple oils, one for cleansing, the other for nourishing, which can be bought for a nominal sum at any drugstore.

She is entirely lacking in vanity and can contemplate herself as dispassionately and unself-consciously as she might the painting of somebody else. This, too, is apt to startle people. I remember the amused gasp in the projection-room one afternoon, when, in the company of studio officials, she sat watching the day's rushes. In the course of them, an enormously magnified image of her face was thrown upon the screen. It was a strange and lovely effect, as though the face of a goddess, many times larger than life, were suddenly revealed to man. Helen, like everybody else, leaned forward in breathless interest. "God, that's beautiful!" she said.

This unself-consciousness, combined with an extraordinary candor, is one of her distinguishing characteristics. When she is in the mood for it, she throws all reticence to the winds and analyzes herself, or you maybe, with ruthless penetration. If you happen to be one of those people who is tied up in emotional knots, it can be a rather devastating experience, but most of her friends are used to it by now and revel in it as much as she does. I might add that, if you hold your own in one of these revealing sessions, you can make up your mind that you're "fit to survive" in the Darwinian and every other sense.

It is her voracious intellectual attitude which is responsible for these analytical bouts. She is interested in everything, wants to know about everything, and increases her mental stature constantly, though her way of acquiring knowledge is, perhaps, a little unusual. She doesn't bother much with logical processes, she just wraps herself around an idea more or less in the way an amoeba wraps itself around a bit of food, a good nourishing way of absorbing information so that, forever after, it is a part of her, not to be forgotten.

A bewildering, fascinating, generous personality, a creature of passionate preferences, ardent and loyal, warm as sunlight is. To know her is to know life in its infinite potentialities and to feel it's not such a bad thing, after all.

"THE PLAY'S THE THING" FOR HELEN GAHAGAN

By Alis De Sola

Actors and actresses, performers generally, are apt to be rather egotistic creatures, serenely indifferent to and often even unaware of the value of a play as a whole. They will be perfectly content with mediocrity, not to say downright worthlessness, as long as their own part allows for a bravura exhibition of their talents. As a result, many commentators have argued that this crude egotism is a necessary part of the performer's endowment, that, without it, he or she cannot reach outstanding heights.

The character and brilliantly successful career of Helen Gahagan provide a complete refutation of this argument. It is always the play itself that first claims her attention. Does it hold together, is its dominant theme expressed throughout in dramatic terms? Does it reflect the reaction to experiences of some profound temperament? Or, granted that its idea falls short of complete realization, has it, at least, something vital to say? A genuine passion in the writing, she feels, may occasionally over-balance purely technical defects.

It is this belief in the paramount importance of the vehicle which has caused her to appear impractical at times. For instance, after a series of Broadway successes, with managers clamoring for her services, she deliberately turned her back on the commercial theatre to do "Beyond" at the Provincetown Playhouse. She found herself in good company. Among the enthusiasts engaged in the production of this experimental play by the German author, Hasenclaver, were Kenneth MacGowan, James Light, Eugene O'Neill, Robert Edmund Jones and Walter Abel. Though its theme was an extremely esoteric one which had no chance of pleasing the general public, Miss Gahagan threw herself into the production with fervor, quite willing to accept small remuneration and a limited audience for the opportunity of acting what she considered a unique and beautiful play.

The same attitude motivated her when she accepted the leading feminine part in "Young Woodley". Friends had warned her that it was the title role which dominated the play and that her own part was a subsidiary one unworthy of her position as a star, but they could not alter her determination. "It's a fine, honest play," she insisted, adding that she felt she could do great things with her part. She was right; not only was the play a tremendous success, with a two years' run in New York, but her performance was a great revelation. She brought out qualities and shades of meaning in her role which even its author, John Van Druten, had not suspected. So impressed was he by the depth and flexibility of the character she created that he later made a novel out of the play, basing his written analyses on Miss Gahagan's interpretation. This novel he gratefully dedicated to her.

She did something very similar with the role of Emily Bronte in Dan Totheroh's "Moor Born", after first entering the lists in the play's behalf. This deeply felt and moving play about the tragic Brontes had been going begging on Broadway because managers thought that its somber story would find no popular response. Miss Gahagan had a different reaction and herself peddled it around, finally persuading the Bushar and Tuerk management to produce it. Directed by her husband, Melvyn Douglas, it proved one of her greatest triumphs, the role in which she came to full artistic maturity. No one saw her depict the dark brooding, frustrated and yet somehow triumphant passion of the central character will ever forget the experience.

She is not always as right as this in her judgements; personal predilection has, on rare occasions, led her astray. But there is no question that she is right in her fundamental attitude. Along with Shakespeare, she believes that "the play's the thing" and that all the arts of the theatre should be concentrated in bringing out, as expertly and beautifully as possible, the author's intention.

Short Stories Hard To Handle, But These Gems Hit New High

By BEATRICE WASHBURN
Herald Book Reviewer
THE BODY IS FAITHFUL, by
Alis de Sola (Dutton);

IN SPITE of its lurid title,
"The Body Is Faithful"
contains some distinguished
short stories, written by a
young cosmopolitan who has
contributed to our better
magazines.

The short story has always
been a literary vehicle to diffi-
cult but once the most skillful
writers can employ it success-
fully. The flame is so slender,
it needs for compression so
much that it is almost impos-
sible to stay within its narrow bounds
and at the same time establish contact with
the whole world.

Miss de Sola's tales are like
nature in a dewdrop. It is all
there, but on an infinitely re-
duced scale. The love between
a neglected girl and the tal-
ented man at a side show is
the story of the lonely and
the maligned the world over.

"Portrait Through Prisms"
tells of a man who loves his
wife more deeply than his wife.
It deals with the color of Ven-
ezuela but also with the tragedy
of unrequited love.

The whole catastrophe of the
Jews is contained in a sketch
of Rachel Stern who decides to
return to the Germany her
father loved and meets a young
man who was once her lover.
The ruin of the German people
is represented in a little tale
about a pianist in a cocktail bar.
Each tale is complete in itself,
done in line drawings but with
overtones that no one with imag-
ination could miss. These stories
themselves are easy reading.

Cincinnati Times

THE BODY IS FAITHFUL, by
Alis de Sola (Dutton).
In this collection of 14 stories
three are truly successful, the
product of a writer, Miss de Sola
who is also a human being capa-
ble of intense feeling. The other
11 are the work of Miss de Sola
the skilled technician. The best of
the three which gives its title to
the whole collection deals with
love between a young, timid, un-
wanted girl and a man whom she
meets at night on the beach in
the deserted boardwalk. Even-
tually in the bright moonlight she
sees his face—the face of the tal-
ented freak in a side-show. I
quote Miss de Sola's idol
phrase, even so, "the body
faithful."—M. H.

Cleveland News
January 12

Our nomination for a year find in the short-story field is ALIS DE
SOLA, whose new book of stories, "The Body Is Faithful" (Dutton),
will remind you of KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S work. Miss De Sola
attributes the greatest influence on her work to SIG-
MUND FREUD and GEORGE SANTAYANA.

Columbia, S.C. State

FICTION
THE BODY IS FAITHFUL, by
Alis De Sola. (Dutton) Unusual
stories, some with exotic settings
which reflect the cosmopolitan per-
sonality of the author, some with
a tender comprehension of child-
hood, its emotions and fears—and all
with an understanding of the hu-
man heart.

Cleveland Press

Collections
THE BODY IS FAITHFUL, by
Alis De Sola (Dutton, \$2.75). These
are strange and beautiful stories in
which the sources of human emo-
tion are exposed with sympathy
and intelligence.

Greensboro, N.C. News

Trashy Tales
THE BODY IS FAITHFUL by Alis De
Sola. E. P. Dutton and Com-
pany, Inc., New York. 209 pp.
2.75.

This is a collection of short sto-
ries, most of which deal with sup-
pressed sex desires that boil into
the open or old men frantically
seeking to recapture lost youth.
"Dirty" is the best word to de-
scribe the book even though the
author is subtle and the stories for
the most part are well written. The
characterization is good.
Children should not be permitted
to read it and neither can it be
recommended for adults.—H. S.

The Cleveland Press, January 14, 1947

LIS DE SOLA is the author of a book of short stories
that are at once strange, beautiful and compelling.
The of the book is **THE BODY IS FAITHFUL** (Dut-
ton, \$2.75). Make no mistake about it, these are unusual
stories, and you will not easily set aside their implications
ed, their unstated meanings are likely to linger with
a long time.

The author has here embarked
on a journey into that vague
nadowland where lurk the com-
plex sources of human emotion;
where we may
also find, in
restless sleep,
old joys and
old sorrows that
long ago re-
turned after their
hour of tri-
umph over man.



Miss De Sola's
explorations
are made with
patience; she
reaches for
hidden motives
and impulses tenderly; she exposes
them with intelligence and sym-
pathetic caution, as one who would
preserve beautiful, fragile things in
their original patterns.

If the characters in this book
seem often strange, they never
deny belief. Rather, they emerge
with dimensions not frequently
seen and never fully comprehended.
In less able hands, her story of
love between a shy, wistful girl
and a tattooed man—a circus
freak—might have been shocking.
Instead, the work is imbued with
sympathy, understanding and
beauty rarely achieved in fiction.
It is from this story that the book
takes its title.

In another tale, superbly execut-
ed, the author exposes lovers who
are in exact opposition to these.
They are a man and woman in
so dwarfed and crowded natural
physical impulses that the lovers
are revolted by their enslavement
to each other. These are mental
anomalities which rarely impress
themselves upon us because we do
not see them, as we do those of the

But Miss De Sola does not al-
ways deal with love. In one in-
stance, she tells us of a juvenile
delinquent in court. His case is not
routine for he has no acquired his
frustrations in a disorganized and
imperfect society. The frustrations
are congenial; they are main-
tained and nourished by a moun-
tainous lust for domination. Here
is a case for which man-made law
has made no provision. Here is a
lad who may one day plunge the
world into another bloody war.
Here is Hitler's small counterpart.
I should like to tell you more
about these stories, but space limi-
tations forbid it. Resulting, as
they do, from profound reflection,
they are executed with the great-
est of care. In each story, we are
drawn closer to the middle of life,
and we find in each of them a
spiritual quality which seems to
imply a belief that the unknowable
in some manner houses something
divine.

— by Emerson Price

Freudian Tint in Ultra-Ultra Violet Tales

"THE BODY IS FAITHFUL, and Other Stories," by Alis de Sola. (Dutton, \$2.75.)

Reviewed by Edward Wagenknecht

If it's the ultra-ultra you want in the short story, then, there can be no doubt about it, this is your meat. Sex is treated not cleanly, boldly, but fiercely, obsessively, complicated with strange perversions, as in the case of the bachelor of science who craved to behold "the most beautiful man she'd ever seen," stretched out "on the dissection table, a sharp knife in her hand."

The internal monolog is used—by itself, again as an accompaniment, an undercurrent to the surface movement of the tale. Some of the stories are repulsive, some a little charming, some trifling; a few may even have a bit of significance. We explore the secret world of childhood—that world into which no adult has ever penetrated—as with the girl in Puerto Rico who was sure that the comet was going to destroy the world.

We catch glimpses of the Kaiser's Germany and of Hitler's Germany, with the shadow of death beginning to creep across it, and of the German temperament—its strange preoccupation with the fantastic and macabre. There is Fraulein Brandt, for example, to whom Siegfried seems to have come again in the person of a handsome young soldier, who fades under his neglect of her, but blooms on possessing him again imaginatively when she believes, mistakenly, that he has been killed.

Miss de Sola calls Freud and Santayana her masters. What Santayana would say to her I don't know. Freud surely would call her daughter. It's a rather dazzling talent she has—make no mistake about that. She writes extremely well; her characters live vividly, in fierce moments; her yarns grip the attention as their weird obsessions grip the creatures of whom she writes.

It Happened In Europe

*An Unusual Collection
Of Vivid Short Stories*

THE BODY IS FAITHFUL. By Alis de Sola. Dutton. 209 pp \$2.75.

By JULIE HALASZ

"THE BODY IS FAITHFUL" is an unusual collection of 14 short stories with a Continental background, a first book for Alis de Sola, and represents her best work. Some of the stories have appeared in various slick publications.

The prose, ably written in a distinguished style, reveals sensitivity of the inner nature of the characters portrayed, who range from children, delinquent and otherwise, to dying old men. Title of the book is derived from the first story: a delicately etched tale of Lily, plain and lonely, yearning for love, who finds it in darkness of night, only to have the light reveal the object of her affections as a sideshow freak—the tattooed man.

Outstanding is "Portrait Through Prisms," which concerns an unprepossessing little man who lavishes great warmth of feeling on animals and especially two seals, while his exotically beautiful wife, mother of four children, waits years "in anguished silence" for signs of love that never appear.

"The Park" characterizes a rich old man who tries to recapture youth by building a beautiful park in an arid valley; only when the project is complete does he realize that he has deceived himself.

The author's use of simple language embroidered into artful phrases produces a prose that is vital, vividly clear—a requisite for craftsmanship—which, combined with variety of original subject material, makes this collection especially enjoyable, good even for a second reading.

Absurdly inadequate as her frame of reference is for life, it serves very adequately to frame the kind of stories she apparently wants to write.

It may even be that this is as far as art can reach in a decaying, doomed society, or for those who have no better anchors than the prophets of chaos can supply.

Providence, R. I. Journal

Short Stories Books by Algren, De Sola Are Commended

THE NEON WILDERNESS, by Nelson Algren. 288 pages. Doubleday. \$2.50.

THE BODY IS FAITHFUL, by Alis De Sola. 209 pages. Dutton. \$2.75.

IT IS surely a sign of health in the contemporary American short story that its practitioners vary so greatly in style, mood, aim, and choice of theme. Here, for example, are two volumes just from the press; each contains fiction that has appeared in *The American Mercury*. Each contains fiction that has appeared in Harper's Bazaar—yet there the parallel breaks down at once. Or not quite; there is one more thing that Mr. Algren and Miss De Sola have in common, something that is hearteningly present in a surprisingly large number of today's short stories and that is warm indignation against racism (to use an ugly word for an ugly thing). Miss De Sola describes a Jewess listening to the band on a German liner: "Hate, hate! screamed the music. Kill! murder the eyes. She felt the stones crushing her ribs, the dogs savage at her heels, and then the band stopped playing." And this is Mr. Algren describing some unworthy American

officers dividing loot in Germany: "By the time it got down to the pics and buck privates there were usually a couple broken swords, a box camera or two—often made in the States—and a beat-out Mahser remaining. We could help ourselves then, but were warned not to be greedy about it, to act like soldiers and not like a bunch of damned niggers."

"The Body is Faithful" is a collection of romantic stories, odd, powerful, tense, full of overtones and undertones, surcharged with emotion, with love, fear, wonder, anger, and sometimes a sense of a morbid unknown something just around the corner. Some of the themes, treated respectfully and artfully by Miss De Sola, would collapse into absurdity at the single push of a parodist—the love affair of the tattooed man, the swimmer who loves the seals ("between him and the seals there was something special, as though they were not animals at all"), the little Salvatore, who won't talk to his parents (a terrifying child, really, bad), the soldier betraying his country for a woman's sake, the old millionaire who builds a park in a desert town because the trees ate his lost youth. And so on, a strange gallery, not absurd, often in fact exquisite, but probably too intense for the average reader. Nearly all the stories are as fine and delicate as flowers—but hothouse blooms, with a fragrance strange, heavy, sometimes overpowering.

BEN C. CLOUGH

Books of the Times

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

SOMETIMES the most careful, subtle and even beautiful writing comes to no good end. The writer becomes so preoccupied with polishing small facets of his work, with laborious refinements of inconsequential minutiae, that his finished story seems only an instrument for his private pleasure. Alis de Sola, gifted as she undoubtedly is, is such a writer. The fourteen short stories that are gathered together in her

"The Body Is Faithful" are singularly disappointing, considering the very real talent that has gone into them.

Miss de Sola was born in Germany of a wonderfully mixed ancestry, Spanish, English, French and German. She spent her childhood in Puerto Rico, was educated in this country and for the last ten years has worked for and contributed to various American magazines.

According to the jacket of this book the two major influences on her writing have been Sigmund Freud and George Santayana.

In Miss de Sola's case Freud seems to have inspired an intense preoccupation with the sexual element in life and Santayana with a desire to imitate his cool and graceful prose. A nodding acquaintance with Freud is probably useful, but an intimate knowledge of his theories can be disastrous. It has reduced a number of Miss de Sola's stories to a messily biological level and made several of them seem quite silly. Santayana's more literary influence has been far happier.

Stories Drift Off Into Ambiguity

Most of these stories are efforts to capture in words the fleeting essence of general emotion, not as it was felt by a particular person with an individual personality of his own, but as it might be felt by any young lover, any middle-aged rake, any discarded mistress. With sensitivity, with poignant awareness of spiritual pain, Miss de Sola has written of the agony of the flesh and the misery of the heart. Sometimes she has used interior monologues. Nearly always she has been deft and subtle, but nearly always, too, she has blurred her focus so that her stories drift off into ambiguity.



Alis de Sola

Those that deal with sexual relations, with what Miss de Sola calls "the stanch and subtle alliance of the flesh," "The subtle bitch," "Mias de Sola's name for the goddess of physical love, is a powerful but hardly a cheerful divinity. She drives a neurotic drudgo to marry the lover she has met only in the dark, even after she discovers that he is a side-show tattooed man. She drives a rich old satyr to pursue innocent shop girls, and a young couple to a marriage neither of them really wants.

But precise and chiseled writing, no matter how gracefully wrought, about such generalized situations, cannot fulfill the proper functions of a story if it deals only with abstractions. A name, a tumult in the blood stream and a surrender to Aphrodite are insufficient. By neglecting character Miss de Sola has devitalized her stories. And she has not made up for it by suggesting mood, atmosphere, ideas and comments on life itself, as do some of our other short-story writers who neglect conventional plot, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Kaye Boyle and Eudora Welty.

One Story Is Oddly Effective

So, it seems to me, the best stories in "The Body Is Faithful" are those that are not haunted by the solemn ghost of Sigmund Freud and that actually make some effort to reach a conclusion, no matter how slight. Thus a story called "Portrait Through Prisms," exotic and bizarre as it is, is oddly effective. It concerns a stout German married to a Latin-American lady of such beauty and poise that he never felt at his ease with his own wife. His need to be demonstrative in his love had to find outlet elsewhere; and found it in the animals of his private zoo, particularly for two seals. Even after his death his grief-stricken but coldly self-possessed wife could not escape the irony of the greater bond that had tied him to the seals. "And then, beating through the shutters closed against the heat, echoing in torment from the farthest patio, terrible, choked, inconsolable, she heard the sobbing of the seals."

Quite a story, this!

One of the shortest and simplest stories in "The Body Is Faithful" is also one of the best, "Sweet Land." It really isn't much more than an anecdote about a refugee German pianist in a cheap Broadway bar and grill; but in a few pages it tells a more poignant story and makes a more valid point about something important, freedom from government by terror, than any of Miss de Sola's more pretentious tales.

But it isn't true that all of Miss de Sola's simpler and shorter stories are necessarily the



Alis de Sola

A NEW author who will captivate you is Alis de Sola. E. P. Dutton & Company have just released a collection of her short stories under the title of "The Body Is Faithful and Other Stories."

The impact of Miss de Sola's pen leaves one spent, for she draws her characters so clearly, so humanly that it is impossible to escape from her spell. Her sensible approach to sex and the tragedy of love will bring her the highest of critical praise.

"The Body Is Faithful" tells of the man who would only declare his love in the dark on the deserted beach and the tortured soul of the recipient of his love. "Portrait Through Prisms" captures the tempo of life in Venezuela and the German who denied his love to his beautiful wife, but gave it to his two pet seals. The descriptive passages such as...

"The seals lifted their narrow heads in an agony of waiting, the tears thick in their eyes and glistening on the short, stiff hairs above their mouths. They climbed up on the stone railing and twisted their flexible bodies in

Miami News

THE BODY IS FAITHFUL. By Alis de Sola. 208 pages. Dutton, \$2.75.

the direction from which he must come and moaned pitifully from time to time. Like silly girls... like silly, undisciplined girls."... It sets the mood for a climax that breaks in a crashing crescendo.

"The Subtle Bitch," "The Park," "Enchantment," "Routine Case," all carry the same impact. Some are reprints originally published in Mademoiselle, American Mercury and Harper's magazine. Others, as the title story, have never been in print. All bear rereading.

Miss de Sola was born in Stendahl, Germany, and classifies herself as a living symbol of the melting pot theory because she represents many European nations, including Spain, England, France and Germany. She was educated mainly in America though she spent the greater part of her childhood in Puerto Rico and lived for a number of years in Europe. A graduate summa cum laude of Barnard College, Miss de Sola majored in philosophy and became a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

During the war Alis de Sola worked as a staff member of the Office of Inter-American Affairs. Her principal job during that period was to act as political editor for the radio division. She names Sigmund Freud and George Santayana as the two major influences on her thinking and writing.

by Dorothy Rayme

better ones. Unfortunately, several are so slight they are hardly worth the telling. Of all fourteen of them only three or four really seem successful. But every one of them shows evidence of intense sympathy for unhappy human beings and of genuine feeling for words. Miss de Sola impresses one as being capable of doing immensely better work than this. She will do so, too, if she remembers that most good fiction is about people who are memorable and interesting in themselves and who are not just representatives of various kinds of suffering.

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Women in Politics Oral History Project

HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS PROJECT

Cornelia Palms

THE CARMEL AND THEATER CONNECTIONS

An Interview Conducted by
Amelia Fry
in 1977

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Portrait of Cornelia Palms by Arnold Genthe

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Date of Interview: December 3, 1977

Place of Interview: Gordon House, the home of Connie and Francis Palms in Monterey, California. The artfully restored and beautifully maintained Gordon House is the oldest frame house in Monterey and is among the homes on the city's self-guided tour of historic buildings.

Those Present: Cornelia Palms and the interviewer.

Actress Cornelia Clampett Palms, "Connie" to her friends, first met Helen and Melvyn Douglas in 1937 in Carmel. The Douglasses were building a house near where Connie was then living following the death of her husband, William Shuman, from Huntington's disease. The friendship then begun was renewed when Connie went to work to support her two young daughters in New York in 1939 and landed a part in "Tapestry in Gray," starring Melvyn Douglas.

In 1940 Connie married Martin Flavin, the celebrated playwright of "Tapestry in Gray," and returned to Carmel. Although Connie and Helen saw each other only intermittently during the next twenty years of living and working a continent apart, their lives were curiously interwoven, with Connie often playing the same role in Carmel's Forest Theater that Helen was playing on Broadway.

In 1962 Connie was divorced from Flavin and married architect Francis Palms. Friendship between these two couples bloomed, and they made a practice of trading house visits when either was on the opposite coast. In recent years Melvyn Douglas has made the Palms' guest cottage his temporary headquarters during California filming of several movies, including "Tell Me a Riddle."

The one-hour interview session took place in the living room following a delicious home-cooked seafood lunch. Indelibly printed in the interviewer's memory are the white-shuttered windows flooded with afternoon light, the antique Chinese chest coffee table that held the tape recorder and a bouquet of bright pink flowers in a fan of green leaves, and the warm colors and textures of the rich designs on the corner cupboards from Max Reinhardt's house in Salzburg.

During the interview, privacy prevailed, with the exception of the handsome golden retriever, Moutard. This indispensable family member met the interviewer at the door, presented her with a favorite, well-chewed shoe, and watched the interview from a position of privilege on the couch.

The taping session resembled more an intimate conversation between friends than a formal interview. Connie is a small, beautifully-boned woman whose vivacious spirit infects her companions. She is a warmly perceptive listener and a compelling storyteller. Her natural flair for the vivid picture, the apt metaphor, and sense of the dramatic had the interviewer sitting on the edge of her chair most of the time. She commands a breathtaking sweep of time within her own history--from her own recollection as a child of nine of the San Francisco earthquake and fire, of her friends among the writers and artists drawn to Carmel (Robinson and Una Jeffers, Dan Totheroh, Mario Ramirez, Arnold Genthe, Noel Sullivan), of two world wars, and travel in Europe, India, and Turkey. It was the interviewer's hope that subsequent interviews would preserve these recollections in a Connie Palms autobiographical memoir.

Connie's sparkle and cheer can light up the most morose around her, while her own life has been laced with tragedy. For nearly two decades, Connie cared for her daughter Cornelia, who succumbed to Huntington's disease in 1962, and she stands by her daughter Nancy in her valiant struggle against the threat of the same disease. During the two years when her interview was in process, Connie and Francis had to cope with major illness and surgery, and Connie surmounted recurrent bouts of painful arthritis. With the help of editor Julie Shearer, she reviewed and approved this transcript. She drew the line, however, at taking the next step--tape recording her own past--in favor of living every precious moment of the present with those who are dear to her. As an historian, the interviewer finds it regrettable; as a friend, understandable.

Amelia R. Fry
Interviewer-Editor

15 June 1981
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley

II THE CARMEL AND THEATER CONNECTIONS

[Interview 1: December 3, 1977]
[begin tape 1, side A]

Meeting Helen in Carmel--1937

Fry: How did you first meet Helen Gahagan Douglas?

Palms: Well, I think it was in '37, because Helen and Mel had come up to build their house in Carmel. Of course they were great friends of Helen and Remsen Bird. So Helen Bird, actually, brought Helen over to my house, which is not very far from the Birds'. She walked in through the gate. She hardly said hello before she said, "Who did this garden? This is absolutely adorable!" And so forth. You know her enthusiasm about everything.

I said, "Tommy Church." He did the most adorable little garden for me. He dug it all the way in and made the whole thing look like a great big window box with seats all around on the edge. So Helen immediately called him and he came down and did their garden for their new house.

So it started out like that. I think that Helen and Rem were not living here then. Rem had not yet retired from Occidental College. Of course, they were great friends down in Hollywood. Then Helen and Mel started to build their house. I don't remember who did the building. Helen, when I was talking to her about it, said, "Now be sure and tell about all our picnics at Point Lobos and all the things we used to do." Very simple things, you know. We'd all go out and talk for hours and then Danny Totheroh would come with us.

This was the first time I met Danny, the first time I met Helen and Mel. I knew Helen and Rem before. Helen [Douglas] said, "Be sure and tell about those sweet onion sandwiches I used to make."

- Palms: Isn't that killing? I wonder why she thought of that. We all just went mad over those lovely red onions; she'd slice them very thin and put them all over buttered French bread. And we'd just sit there and eat sweet onion sandwiches on Helen, which is not terribly important, except that Helen always talks about that.
- Fry: May I hold you to this point just a little bit more before you move on to the next one because I want to know more about what their house is like. Is it still standing?
- Palms: It's still standing but it's been changed. Of course we could go look at it but I don't know who owns it now. A young man named Dick [Richard] Mack bought it and he lived there with his wife and raised several little children. But the house had lovely big openings. It was very simple. And it had a lovely big living room and dining room.
- Fry: How high were the ceilings and the windows?
- Palms: There were high ceilings and the openings were big and they looked out over the Mission, uninterrupted. There wasn't a house built in front of the fields, you see, then.
- Fry: Was it kind of on a bluff or what would you say?
- Palms: Just on the hillside in back of the Mission. They adored that view over the mountains and up the valley. It looked away from the ocean. It had I don't remember exactly how many bedrooms but I know that--let me see, when were the children born, do you remember?
- Fry: Mary Helen was born about that time, '37.
- Palms: I think so. Let's see. [Mrs. Palms checks interviewer's notes.] These are interesting questions.
- Fry: Now, do you remember the children being there?
- Palms: No, I don't remember the children at all, because it was--all that period was all building. It took about a year to complete the building. [Dog advances affectionately on interviewer. Mrs. Palms intervenes.] Here! Come on, Moutard. Now you sit down. That's a good dog. Stay!

I used to go down and visit Helen and Rem in Hollywood and then we would go to Melvyn and Helen's for dinner quite often. And there'd be groups of people. So we were kind of in touch with each other throughout the year, you know, every so often.

Theater Days in New York--1938

Palms: Then the play. Helen and Mel went East because Mel was to be in the theater. When did he go to war? He went off to war about...

Fry: In '42, I guess.

Palms: Forty-two. Well, then the play in New York that Mel was doing was "Tapestry in Gray." Is that down there?

Fry: Oh, it was?

Palms: Yes, and that was '38.

Fry: Okay, because I saw the--

Palms: It was the end of '38.

Fry: --playbill and there was no year date on it.

Palms: He left Helen out here in California, and he went back to be in this play which, I regret to say, he wasn't terribly happy about.

Fry: He was unhappy about?

Palms: No, he never was very happy about the play.

Fry: Was that Dan Totheroh's play?

Palms: No, that was Martin Flavin's play!

Fry: And you were married to Martin Flavin?

Palms: No, I wasn't married to him; I was just back there and I was going to be in a play of Danny Totheroh's. And something happened to the play and it was postponed.

Fry: In New York?

"Tapestry in Gray"

Palms: In New York. So there I was. I was with Equity and I would find out every day what plays were being cast and would walk around to see what I could get. Finally I heard about this play of

Palms: Martin Flavin's, "Tapestry in Gray," which starred Melvyn Douglas and Elissa Landi. So I went to the theater where they were casting for it. I remember it was a terrible, snowy, miserable, awful day, and I was so cold. There were hundreds of people out in front of the theater, and I thought it was a matinee and I'd gotten to the wrong place and that they'd been let out after the performance, you see.

Suddenly,--shall I tell you all these crazy things?

Fry: Yes!

Palms: There were two lines of exit (people being turned away). And this is fantastic, because they were all unemployed people, trying to get jobs in the theater. Actually, I remember talking to Mel about it later on and he said that one-quarter of the people were probably legitimate [actors]. But most of them were just trying to get a job any way; they were so desperate. I mean, most were not a bit theatrical and were without any background.

I was standing at the foot of the stairway, ready to go up, when this little old lady, who was at the top, said, "Well, I've got my part and I still have my clothes on." I heard her say, with this pushing, jamming crowd. I finally got to the top and there was somebody there who was going to sort of put you aside for type casting--look you over and see how tall you were, how old you were, what you looked like. And I saw this door and it was open and I saw Martin Flavin in there.

(I had met Martin years before at a picnic, around 1930, at his ranch in the Cachagua Valley. The artist John O'Shea took me!) I thought, why there's Martin--I know him--so I walked in. Here was the casting room. I wasn't announced; I just sat down. Martin almost died when he looked up and saw me.

"What is your name," said the man--the director--I can't remember his name. And I told them. And they went through the script. Martin said, "Give her the part of the governess to read." So I was given this script. It had "Tapestry in Gray" by Martin Flavin, starring Melvyn Douglas, Elissa Landi, and then the director and the producer. I couldn't find my part. Finally, way over in the corner I found one little word. It said, "Eric." And that was my part.

The governess has taken this child for a walk, and the child has run away from her and was killed on the street. This poor governess has to come back and tell the family. That was the big scene. And I burst into tears in the middle of the whole thing,

Palms: was sobbing away, telling them about the child. I can remember Martin's eyebrows flying up and his saying, "That's enough of that; this is Elissa Landi's scene, not yours." I remember that very well.

Finally, I had other parts. I played three different parts in that play. Anything to earn a lot of money because I was taking care of my children.

My husband William Shuman died of Huntington's chorea in 1929, an unknown disease then. We were married seven years and had two little girls--Cornelia and Nancy.

Melvyn was so wonderful in the play. We used to talk in the wings. He was not happy about the play because he recognized that it was overproduced. You see it was a great big production--four stages and one master stage. Miss Landi had two dressing rooms on stage, it was so impossible for her to go to her dressing room and change. Poor Martin was sitting out there in the audience changing the lines all the time, and that upset Mel.

He had said that Helen was coming, he didn't know quite when, but she was coming. That was the time when Helen arrived, and I remember I was sitting down in the audience waiting to go on, in the seats in the big empty theater. Suddenly this beautiful, heavenly Helen came through the lower box near the stage. She was peeking around, looking up at the stage, and Mel saw her. He leaped over the footlights into the box and grabbed hold of Helen and they went off and that was the end of them. There was no more rehearsal.

Then we saw a lot of Helen. At least that's when I saw a lot of her there in New York. The play, I think, only lasted about three weeks. So you see it wasn't very much.

That was the first time that I was with Mel a lot. He was so underplayed. Everything was so direct and simple, and he never put on any acts. Everybody adored him. He'd be the last one to make a statement about, opinion about anything. He was a beautiful person. Everybody knows he was a beautiful actor. I don't remember what happened after that, 1939.

Marriage to Martin Flavin--1940

- Palms: Nineteen-thirty-nine. And then Martin and I got married in 1940. During that year, we used to go down to Hollywood. That's when I saw Helen and Mel.
- Fry: Was your affair with Martin Flavin developing while you were with Helen and Mel?
- Palms: No, not all. He was married. His wife was drowned in a terrible tragedy the end of that year when they came home. Then I didn't see him for about six months. The following year is when I saw him all the time. That's when he, of course, lived down at The Highlands.
- Fry: Here?
- Palms: Here. He had this beautiful house in The Highlands which I used to call Wuthering Heights because it was so tragic. It was a great stone house on the edge of the sea. When I was there, Helen and Mel used to come out there. Of course they knew Martin long before I did.

"Double Cast" with Helen

- Palms: I'd see Helen quite often. She'd come out to stay at their house.
- We had this wonderful exchange of plays. She'd have just finished something in New York and I'd be doing it here. It got to be a joke.
- Fry: By coincidence?
- Palms: Yes. It had nothing to do with anything at all.
- Fry: Tell me what plays you would exchange.
- Palms: She played Emily Bronte in "Moor Born" of Danny Tothoroh's, and I played Emily Bronte in the First Theater in California (here in Monterey). Then she played Emily in "Distant Drums" of Danny Tothoroh's in New York, and I played it in the Forest Theater in Carmel. We did "A Doll's House," and I played Nora and she played Nora. So you see, it was amazing that we seemed to have the same parts.

"Moor Born"

Fry: Take "Moor Born" as an example. How did you two see that characterization of Bronte? Were there differences?

Palms: I think we had a difference in that Helen was a very strong Emily Bronte. I didn't feel that way about Branwell. I mean, I had a tremendous love for Branwell and was terribly sympathetic, always protecting him from the father when he'd come home from the pub.

I'd try to get him to bed before his father would see him. Of course, Helen did exactly the same thing. But hers was all in strength. As I told you, in one line, as I remember it, when he's dying, Emily is with him. In Dan Totheroh's words, Emily says to Branwell, "Stand up to die, Branwell. Stand up." And she picks him up and holds him up, and he dies in her arms.

I couldn't possibly do that. They would have hysterics because this man, in the first place, was about six feet high and I couldn't have supported him.

Fry: And you weighed about how much?

Palms: I don't know. About 105 or something pounds.

Helen was in the audience that night when I played Emily, and I was absolutely terrified when I knew she was there. Afterwards, she came and said, "Connie, what happened to that line about Branwell?"

I said, "I couldn't possibly hold Branwell up to die; I couldn't do it physically. I might have tried to do it mentally, if I'd stood back and spoken to him." Then we laughed about that.

She had a marvelous conception. Some people felt that Emily might even have been in love with Branwell. There were no men in their lives in Wuthering Heights, you know. It might have been without her realizing it at all. She could have been very much in love with him. But I felt a tremendous sympathy for him.

Fry: You had a more sympathetic, loving kind of caring for--

Palms: I wanted always to protect him. I thought he needed such protection. Not in love but loving him. Helen wanted him to stand up for himself, and be a man. She was strong, and it was a wonderful concept. I think she did exactly what Emily Bronte did.

Fry: By trying to instill her strength in him?

Palms: Into him as a human being.

Fry: Then she portrayed a very strong, self-reliant woman who wanted--

Palms: --Branwell to stand up on his own two feet. I think that I'm right because we did talk about it.

I remember Robinson and Una Jeffers, who were great admirers of the Brontes. Una was mad about the Brontes! They were there that same night. Una came up afterwards and said, "But Connie, you were not strong enough; you should have pushed him down in his chair and just told him what you thought of him." Well, I don't believe that. I don't think she was as violent as that, Emily Bronte.

When I was there, I went to see their house in England. It was extraordinary because the living room was exactly like the end of this building here [points to picture] where the play was done. I'll show it to you, right down the street here in Monterey. It was called the First Theater. It has a stage at the end and it has a window here and it has a fireplace at the end of the room, which they used on stage. Then it had a little opening and a real stairway that went up to the attic, where we kept all the costumes and so forth. We used their stage as a room.

As I went into their [the Brontes'] house, I couldn't believe it! I mean, it was the same room that we'd done the play in. Wasn't that amazing? With the stairway, white wood. We ought to go in the theater just to look at it, because it's just right down the street.

Fry: I looked at it about ten years ago. I don't remember the stairway. Was it on the right as you face the stage?

Palms: As you face the stage it's in the back, just a little stage right. It was quite interesting. It was a tiny little ridiculous theater, you know, to do anything, but it had a lot of atmosphere.

Fry: Did Totheroh direct you?

Palms: No, it was directed by a perfectly wonderful young man, Mario Ramirez, from South America, who was a friend of Noel Sullivan's. He was a perfectly extraordinary man--an artist--and always interested in the theater.

Fry: Did he die?

Palms: Yes.

Fry: One of the letters in Sullivan's collection from you says you're having a really tough time getting over Mario's death. I have a note on that here. You tell Noel that he is "a perfect example of friendship" in helping you and that you're sending him the copy of "Moor Born" that you had given to Mario.

Palms: That was it. I remember that now. The play opened, and Mario was taken ill during that performance. He was taken to the hospital and he died the next night. And we had to go on playing. I remember after the performance the second night, we went out to Noel's house and we all sat there as they do in the Catholic church. Mario's casket was there, and there he was. We all brought flowers and sat around and talked about him. He was a beautiful person. Everybody just adored him. And talented.

Helen gave him great praise, I mean, unusually so. This was just a little amateur theater production. He gave it tremendous feeling. We talked about Emily Bronte, you know.

Fry: You and Mario?

Palms: Naturally, as a director. He was very sensitive. Charlotte and Anne he never was quite as interested in but he knew them perfectly, just as if he almost knew them as people. Emily he had always thought about and that's why he wanted to do the play, because he'd read about them most of his life.

Fry: And he agreed with your characterization?

Palms: He thought that it was almost as if she'd never had a baby, would never have a child, and that Branwell was kind of her child. I instinctively felt that. It may have been the young man who was playing the part, you know. He might have given it that performance, so I reacted to that.

Noel played the father in it. He was really Dr. Bronte--I've forgotten--the Reverend Bronte. How did they call him? Who was always calling for his tea "black and brackish" and so forth. Noel was perfectly marvelous in it. He was a terribly shy person. I think most people who are able to get up and give a perfectly beautiful performance--a very real, true performance--are people who are shy. They suddenly become this other person and they just forget. Noel stuttered and had a hard time getting his words out. But he would get into this part, and you wouldn't believe it; once he knew his lines he was somebody else and there was no stuttering. It was amazing.

Fry: What other play did you say you followed Helen in out here?

"Distant Drums"

Palms: The other part was Emily in "Distant Drums." That's Danny Totheroh's. It's the story of the Oregon wagon train and the people coming across and the Indians attacking them and Emily saving the wagon train by going right out to them.

Fry: She is the leader of the wagon train?

Palms: She was not the leader but she was the woman who was very sensitive. All the other women were suspicious of her. They'd say, "What's she doing now?" because she'd be out with the children, telling about the stars. Then she would talk to them about the Indians and how they were really loving and kind and we had to understand them. Of course, she was powerful because she did express herself and people began to believe in her. So they were not as fearful.

Fry: So she had a definite kind of leadership quality about her, again as a strong woman?

Palms: Of course. Look at her, leading her whole family, just walking off.

Fry: You mean at the end of the play?

Palms: The end of the play she turns and tells her father that the Indians have to be told that we love them and that we understand and that we are not here to hurt or harm them. And I am going to see that everything is quieted and calm. I am going to save this troupe of people. She leaves and goes out into the plains. That's the end of the play. You have to draw your own--

Fry: You never know whether it's a sacrifice or whether she--

Palms: --or whether she's accepted. The story from Danny was that stories had come back about this woman who had come into a tribe and married one of the tribesmen and stayed there for the rest of her life. Danny's opinion was that she went right off to the Indians and stayed forever.

Fry: Did you portray this Emily as a strong, sturdy pioneer type?

Palms: She had to be. She was forever lifting people's burdens, trying to help them--the old people. She was young. They were timid and frightened and so she was forever comforting and being the stronger person. Because she had to.

Fry: What was Helen's view of that part?

Palms: I think Helen must have been perfectly marvelous in it. In the first place, she has that physical strength and that beauty. I never saw her in either one of those plays. You know how loving she is and comforting and understanding in her own dear self. I can see her and I think she'd have been very, very strong. She would always make people feel that she was much stronger than I would ever try to do. I think.

Fry: And what was the third play you mentioned?

Palms: The third play was "A Doll's House." No, as a matter of fact, I don't think [checks notes]--

Fry: That's not on there.

Palms: No, I don't think that was one of Helen's. That's about all there was of the theater thing.

Fry: You think she didn't do "Doll's House"?

Palms: I don't think so. Oh, she may have. I don't see any record.

Dan Totheroh as Director

Fry: I wanted to ask you. Did Totheroh direct you in "Distant Drums?"

Palms: Dan directed that. He was marvelous.

Fry: Dan Totheroh?

Palms: Yes, he directed that. Mario did "Moor Born." Danny did a beautiful job in directing. And he was very severe. He's a very gentle person, you know.

Fry: How was he severe as a director?

Palms: About detail, about everything. No talking. The actors had to get right off the stage after their part and go down below and disappear. He'd dismiss anybody who came into the audience and, of course, outsiders were not permitted to listen to rehearsals and so forth. Danny would have them all out. It was quite an amazing revelation because he was always such a gentle person. Well, naturally, it was his play and he knew how to direct. Though I don't think he did a great deal of directing apart from his own plays.

Fry: I've talked to him on the telephone at some length from time to time and I got the impression that he was just the gentlest, most loving, enthusiastic type of person.

Palms: Tremendous enthusiasm and very sensitive. Very.

Fry: When it came to putting on a play--

Palms: --that was his business. He was a director then and he was not Danny Tothoroh. Not your friend.

Fry: How did he work with Helen and Mel?

Palms: I have no idea. I don't think he directed it. Maybe he did. I don't really know.

Fry: They directed one of his plays, you know, the children of the Depression play?

Palms: Oh yes, what was that? The children that wandered across the country?

Fry: In the Depression. They changed the name of it to something else on Broadway.

Palms: I remember that play well. I read it.

Fry: It was named something like "Searching for the Sun."

Palms: That was it. That's exactly what it is. But I don't see it here [checks notes].

Fry: Here it is.

Palms: Oh, it's in Danny's--

Fry: --from his papers in The Bancroft Library. It did have a different name at one point. Mel was very interested in that play, as I understand it, and he and Helen put some money into it, I believe [consults notes].

Palms: I think they did.

Fry: No, actually it was "Mother Lode," because Helen said they lost \$5,000 on his "Mother Lode" involvement.

Palms: That was produced by Helen and Melvyn.

Fry: Did you get an idea of how they worked together?

- Palms: No, I have no idea. I think they'd work very well together. But I think Dan would have tremendous respect for everything Helen and Mel said. I think he would not be the leader. I think he'd be very happy to work with them but also listen to them.
- Fry: That was 1935 for "Mother Lode" and 1936 for "Searching for the Sun," which was also called "Children of the Road."

Helen's Style of Acting

- Fry: What can you tell me about Helen's acting? What roles did you see Helen in?
- Palms: Strangely enough, I saw Helen when she played in San Francisco in the musical, "Cat and the Fiddle."
- Fry: Wasn't that the one that ran for a long, long time? I think it broke all records.
- Palms: Do you remember when it was played?
- Fry: "Cat and the Fiddle" played twice—at the Belasco in Los Angeles and in San Francisco.
- Palms: Yes, 1939.
- Fry: "Helen carried the play," is the only note I have.
- Palms: She was absolutely beautiful and her voice was perfectly beautiful. Without any effort. I only remember her in that play as just utterly enchanting, very real. Beguiling. The audience was in the palm of her hand. I just sat there and, as I remember, I just watched Helen. I don't know who else was in the play. She moves beautifully. It's surprising because she's such a tall person.
- Fry: She's not that fragile beauty that you have; her beauty is of a rather strong woman.
- Palms: Yes. Great strength. And that beautiful head and that beautiful bust that she has.
- [end tape 1, side A; begin tape 1, side B]
- Fry: What do you mean, you remember her throat?

- Palms: Well, I remember she sat there and when she would turn her head, I remember how beautiful she was. This long sort of swan-like feeling she would give you. She sang with such ease, never any effort. I was just enchanted. Of course, she was a very fine actress with a lovely voice.
- Fry: I have read so many reviews of her plays that mention the grace of her movement.
- Palms: She's very graceful, anyway. She comes into a room and her arms are always out to you--
- Fry: --hugging the whole world.
- Palms: --hugging everybody. I have pictures of her here at the table at a dinner party. She would be the one at the table who was listening while everybody else was telling all about themselves and what they were doing. She would draw them out. Most of these people, perhaps, would be people she had just met that evening or didn't know terribly well, as she was visiting. I said to Francis [Palms], "There she is. Look at her; she's listening to Allen Griffin, and he's just loving it. He's just telling her everything." She has that quality, of drawing you out. So few people have that. Francis and I often say, "Nobody listens." You tell people something and they don't listen. Don't you find that with people? They just don't seem to have the time to listen. I don't know why they bother asking you anything!
- Fry: Helen is very different about that.
- Palms: I think she is very truly interested. Something a part of her nature.
- Fry: That's an intrinsic part of her personality. What about her stage personality? Do you think that every actor or actress has a way of acting? Could you describe how Helen acted? I've read very little criticism of it. The only thing I've been able to pick up is that sometimes her movements were too big for the vehicle of the play she was in. She was too strong.
- Palms: I'm not able to judge because the only other play I've seen her in was here, with Vincent Price at Del Monte, "The Constant Wife."
- Fry: The Somerset Maugham play.
- Palms: Yes. And "Cat and the Fiddle." I don't think I've seen Helen in anything else. I've only read about her and known that she's done it. Of course, when she tells you something about a play she's in, you almost feel that you've seen her, because she's so vivid. I would use that word. I think she's the most vivid actress. Just in the "Cat and the Fiddle," I remember every move she made. That was way back in 1933, or something, wasn't it? I've forgotten.

Fry: Thirty-nine, I believe.

Palms: Now only because of listening to her, I think she'd have a very definite concept of the character in her mind. I don't think she'd ever slip out of it. I think Helen Hayes and Katherine Cornell were very superb actresses but I always think they were the same. I think Cornell was the same almost in everything.

Fry: They didn't really change character?

Palms: I think that Helen, from her description and when I talked to her and listened to her, or when she was talking to somebody about something she did, I could see that she had worked out in her mind a concept of this person, a characterization. And she'd never slip out of it. She would just be that character from when the curtain went up until it went down. Many people slip in and out of a characterization, I think, in the theater.

Fry: Did you and she ever talk about theories of acting? Schools of acting?

Palms: No. Very little. I didn't see her for a long, long time.

Fry: After the days in New York?

Palms: Only when she built her house in Carmel and then back in New York in 1938 and then down in Hollywood in 1941. When she went back to live in New York and Vermont, I was living here and so I didn't see very much of them when I was married to Martin.

An Uncommon Friendship

Palms: Afterwards, when Francis and I were married in 1962--that's '63--we've seen Helen and Mel almost every year or been with them someplace. Or they've come to stay with us here. When Mel was doing a movie here in Pebble Beach, he would stay with us. That was with Robert Redford and Don Porter in "The Candidate" or something. Just recently. It also went on television.

Fry: "The Best Man?"

Palms: No. "The Candidate." When Mel would come out to do a film or something, he would always call us. Then he and Helen would come up, just drive up and stay in our little guest house. They generally had friends of theirs come down from San Francisco and they'd come

Palms: here and we'd have dinner or we'd go out over across the plaza to Gallatin's Restaurant. We never stopped talking, all four of us. We had so much to say. I just want to listen to both of them, and Francis and Mel have a wonderful rapport. We believe in the same things--politically, spiritually, and every other way. I just adore them. So does Francis.

I feel it's a very special honor to be their friends. When they leave, I always feel I've learned something very important after I've talked to them. I always feel strengthened.

Fry: I have a feeling you're not talking about adding facts to your reserve of knowledge.

Palms: Something else. If I'm in trouble or in the case of illness of my children and all, there's this comforting that comes from Helen. Not only comforting but she always gives something to work on to help. What's more beautiful in a relationship? So I value every minute.

Fry: Something in the way of advice?

Palms: Yes. Or suggestions. Or just her love. To me it's much more important than anything else. All the rest of it is extremely interesting and exciting--political discussions and so forth. But this is very special. I don't know anyone else we have that same rapport with. Francis has the same thing. So we have a very happy time. We have fun; it's not all very serious.

Helen's Carmel Circle

Fry: I wonder if we've dealt with all questions on Helen's Carmel years.

Who was in the crowd she associated with while they were here?

Palms: It was really a very small group. There was Noel Sullivan, Danny Tothoroh, and Helen and Remsen Bird. Robinson Jeffers and Una knew them.

Fry: Did they manage to socialize much with the Jeffers? I thought he was such a recluse.

Palms: Oh, no. He used to be at every dinner party that Noel gave, with Una. But not parties with a great many people. When we get talking a little later, I'll have to tell you the funniest story about Robinson Jeffers; you can't believe it!

Fry: I'll make a note of that so we won't forget it.

Palms: I have the dearest thing. When Cornelia, this child--

Fry: Your daughter.

Palms: --was in school down in Arizona, she won the national prize for poetry, which was nothing more or less than school work but it was perfectly beautiful. I had known Robin and was terribly fond of both of them. So I showed this poem to Robin. He autographed a book for Cornelia and said, "May you write better poems than these, Robinson Jeffers." I still have the book with his autograph.

They were very good friends.

Fry: Who?

Palms: Helen and Mel knew Robin and Una. The Jeffers were very close friends to the Birds. And we were very close friends to the Jeffers. It was a nice kind of little group.

Fry: My impression of Robinson Jeffers is that he was a very reticent man--

Palms: Oh, he was!

Fry: --and that someone like Helen with her enthusiasm could just run right over him.

Palms: I think she was very aware of exactly what his reaction would be. She was very gentle with him. I know that when Robin once found himself with someone, then he relaxed. But he was impossible! I mean, he never spoke until he found out some. . . oh, this is so funny! It has nothing to do with anything we're talking about now, but I've got to tell you. The first night I met Robinson Jeffers was at Noel Sullivan's for dinner. It was Noel's birthday. We were all going to bring a poem to Noel. So I met Mr. Jeffers and Mrs. Jeffers and several people. We went in to dinner and I found myself sitting next to Robin. I turned to him and I said, "Mr. Jeffers, have you written a poem for Noel Sullivan?"

He said, "Oh, yes."

I said, "Well, I'm not going to read mine. I'm just not going to do it. I'm going to tear it up. I can't!"

He said, "I'll give you mine to read and you give me yours." So I gave him my poem under the table and I took his. And Robin got up and read the silly thing that I'd written. I mean, it was full of love for Noel and everything but--. Everybody sighed deeply. [Laughter]

Palms: I got up and read these five beautiful lines. Perfectly beautiful. And they said, "Oh, dear little Connie. Oho, that was really a nice try." He nudged me, like this [demonstrates], and we had hysterics. You can imagine what happened to our friendship. It was just sealed forever. [Laughter]

Don't you think that's just marvelous?

Fry: I think it's just great! And it does show me a different side of him.

Palms: I don't think I ever really heard him laugh out loud. I did hear him just have a lovely little laugh one evening.

I loved the boys--

Fry: Oh, you knew the twins--Donnan and Garth?

Palms: Yes. They were darling. I still see Donnan all the time.

Fry: Is he the astronomer?

Palms: No, the astronomer is Robin's brother. Of course, Robin knew a lot about astronomy, too.

Fry: Tell me about Helen and Mel's relationship with them.

Palms: I don't know enough about it. When people came up for a weekend or for a few days, it's not as though they lived here and you sort of exchanged ideas and walked on the beach and talked. (There was kind of a little path everybody took in Carmel. It went up the main street, down on the beach, and around by the Jeffers' point. And you'd frequently meet these same people who took that walk.) But when someone just came up for a few days, then everybody'd want to go on picnics. That was the big thing that we did.

In the evenings, we'd sit around and have dinner one place or another, and talk. It wasn't like entertaining.

Fry: It was loosely structured?

Palms: It was lovely. Very simple. I don't think that there were so many of Helen and Mel's friends here. They came up really to relax, really get away from people, I'm sure.

Fry: That was the type of living that they were able to indulge in.

Palms: I think it meant a lot to them. Because they had such an active schedule, you know.

Fry: Would you have meals on the beach?

Palms: Oh, yes. We had picnics, we had suppers on the beach. Goodness, all kinds!

Fry: Is this where the Jeffers would join you?

Palms: No. I think, mostly it would be up at Noel Sullivan's house because he was staffed with a lot of servants and he'd have a really, truly dinner party. People would put on pretty things and drift around with cocktails.

If they would come to our house in exchange, we'd sort of help fix the table and chat. Very informal. And heavenly!

Fry: That was the part that Helen and Mel--

Palms: They liked that. I'm sure it meant a great deal to them. The other kind of thing was the continuity of Hollywood.

Fry: More New York and Hollywood.

Palms: Even when we'd go to her apartment in New York--Mary Helen was cook one evening (she was marvelous; everything was organized and perfectly wonderful)--it was always very informal there. Except if it were planned for a certain person. Then, I suppose they had all sorts of formal evenings. Whenever I was there, it was always just kind of the same thing. It was dear.

Francis and I stayed there when they were in Vermont once. We used to have the most wonderful time in that apartment.

Fry: You mean the house on the lake?

Palms: No, not in Vermont. In New York. I used to sit there and look out over the river, and we would talk about Helen and Mel and what a wonderful background it was for them. I loved her room and her typewriter and her busy desk; I could just see activity. I don't know how she accomplished so many things. The last few years she's been doing so many speeches and going about the country. Goodness!

Fry: Did you say that you saw her on tour?

Palms: No, I just saw her with Vincent Price here. Interesting people they may have met here I may have forgotten. I know who I'll talk to--Lee [Leander James] Crowe, secretary at Hollow Hills, which was Noel's house. Lee knew everybody who ever came to the house. He's a

Palms: great friend. He lives right here. I'll call Lee and then we'll find out who the people were really and truly that I may not have known about. I wasn't with them every second. [Narrator makes notes.]

Helen's Developing Political Awareness

Fry: Do you know anything about Helen's developing political awareness in the late thirties? She said that she didn't really become politically aware until Mel became quite involved and really led her to know about the plight of the farm workers.

Palms: I only know that that's exactly what was happening then. I don't know why it happened. Except that I think she was not that much interested in the theater. This became the important way of life for her. I think that her great sympathy toward people and her understanding of people would naturally lead her into that kind of awareness in the political field, so that she could be in a position where she could help the poor. Think of all those people at that time! Devastated. The farm workers and the people that Danny was writing about.

Fry: The migrant workers who came from Oklahoma?

Palms: Yes. I think that it would be imperative for her to do something about it. I mean, she's that kind of a person.

Fry: Do you remember her talking about it in those days?

Palms: Well, I can remember that this was a very vivid interest. When was it she ran for Congress?

Fry: She ran in 1944. But she was interested in the plight of the people along the southern part of the Valley for a number of years before that.

Palms: I only know that she had that interest in people who were wandering and who were homeless and who needed help. She used to talk about it all the time. Because that was the way it developed; that was what she did.

I'm trying to think of people here; I'm sure Lee can tell me these things [makes notes]. I guess that must have been about the late thirties because that's when I was seeing her.

Fry: That's when they were building their house here.

Palms: Nineteen thirty-seven.

Fry: But they only used the house intermittently, isn't that right?

Palms: They did then. They just came up and stayed in it from time to time.

Fry: Then she sold it in the mid-forties.

Visit to Del Mesa

Palms: That's right. So they really didn't have it very long, did they, when you think about it. When they came out three or four years ago, they were really quite earnestly looking around to see if they'd like to find a house here. And we went up to Del Mesa--I'll never forget--where all the elderly people go to retire. Now they've taken younger people along with it, too. It's quite beautiful; the view is beautiful. But it's so sterile. Everybody does the same thing; you can almost know what they're doing behind that wall which is like yours.

I took her to some friends up there and they showed the house. There was absolute silence when we got in the car. We drove down the hill and out to Carmel Valley. Then Helen said, "Ohhh! I'm breathing! [Narrator intersperses gasping breaths.] I thought I was going to smother up there." It was so typical. Can't you hear her? "Open the windows, Connie." It was terribly funny.

Fry: She really found it oppressive?

Palms: I know people are happy up there and they're people that I like and know, a few. But I couldn't stand it. I know I couldn't.

Fry: Like putting people in boxes.

Palms: Their lives are so simplified that they grow old because they have nothing to do. I can see them sitting. They just sit. Because the garden's taken care of, they have somebody they can call on to make up a bed or clean the dishes any time they feel unable. It just gets to be so sterile.

I'd rather get a sleeping bag if I didn't have any place and just go out of doors someplace. I really would. I'd last about a week at Del Mesa.

Fry: Your house here is certainly a unique one. I hope we can put a photograph of this in, too.

Palms: I've got some lovely pictures of the house that Morley Baer took.

Challenges of Marriage

Palms: Francis and I have differences of opinion and we talk them out. We don't quarrel or scream at each other. We find that when we are arguing about something that it is quite interesting to find out what your spouse thinks. And he wants to find out what I think. I think that's stimulating. I think it'd be terrible boring to agree with your beloved one forever and ever. I think you have to find out what each person's thinking. Because they are individuals.

And they [Helen and Mel] are such two individuals! Two very special people. I've heard them have wonderful word battles, you know.

Fry: With a lot of energy, I imagine.

Palms: With a lot of energy, but always ending up by laughing something off and saying, "Well, I'm glad to know that's what you really think. As a matter of fact I think I agree with you on this point but maybe not on that." It's such an intelligent way to talk to each other, if you find out what you and your beloved are really thinking.

I really think that people who have a lovely relationship--really a substantial, good, fine, lasting one--often have differences. They have to.

Fry: Somehow they've learned how to accommodate them.

Palms: Yes, exactly that. One thing that I have learned in this wonderful experience of being married to Francis (because we're very happy, very close) is to make communication crystal clear. Be sure that you communicate so that you're understood. The only time when we've had anything that's been very unhappy is when I'm very impulsive and I get terribly excited and enthusiastic and I think Francis is understanding me when he hasn't the slightest idea of what I'm talking about. And maybe I've hurt his feelings or something.

Fry: I can see how Helen might do that same thing.

Palms: I was just thinking that. Helen has that [mimics Helen's tone], "Now, Mel, now, Mel. Listen to me; I want to tell you something." You know, you can hear her. He'll sit there and look at her. I think he lets her just get it all off her chest.

Fry: Yes, he's so stolid and quiet.

Palms: Of course, Francis does the same thing. You see, he's very quiet.

Fry: There are so many pitfalls in marriage between two people who, when they believe something, each of them, fervently believes it-- in political things and, I imagine, in such things as how a play should be done or how the children should be brought up. Basic decisions like building or buying a house in Carmel. I wonder how they managed to avoid disaster?

Palms: I think they had tremendous respect for each other. I think that's very vital. To say, this is my friend. Not just my love and husband and my beloved, but my friend, which is very important.

Fry: Did they seem to have that sort of relationship?

Palms. Oh, definitely. Helen would get so excited and upset about something. And Mel would be very quiet. I've seen Mel just get up and say, "Well," and walk out to the garden and walk up and down. On some subjects.

I think that's a very intelligent approach to friendship. You just talk it out. I think they're very honest people.

Fry: Did they have anything in their basic philosophy of living that they were unable to come to an agreement on? Of course, they agreed on political activities, the priority of time that this should be given.

What about the philosophy of marriage itself? A lot of marriages break up today because the partners have never been able to agree on how much freedom the other partner should have to live a life and go about a career or how many friends and if any friends of the opposite sex. All of these things have to be solved in order to live together.

Palms: I don't know how to answer. I don't think they ever had any problem about their careers. Which is fantastic, a miracle. Helen is so proud when he's doing something. He's so proud of her. There never has been any jealousy.

I always wonder about people who play together. Like that wonderful couple in New York. Forever they played. He just died, I think--the Lunts. I wonder what their life was like on the farm? They were up there in the northern part of Michigan or Wisconsin. They were so fantastic together in the theater.

Palms: I think in those days there was an entirely different thought about this freedom thing. Young people are just screaming about being free, and I think they're protesting too much. I think you have to have a natural freedom; I have a perfect freedom with Francis. And he has with me.

Fry: Obviously Helen felt that she had.

Palms: Oh, yes, I know she did.

For instance, Francis last night went off to a dinner where he was part of this [Monterey] Institute of Foreign Studies Senior Fellows committee (he's the architect of the Institute). Other people's wives were going; the other women were on certain committees. This all sounds pretty silly but I want to tell you that there's a lot of people who would just die if their husband went out to dinner and just left them flat. It didn't enter my consciousness.

When I've been in plays here, which I do for fun a lot of times now, Francis will take me to rehearsal and leave me and come home to the office and do his drawing and work and then come pick me up. There's never any, "You're out every night rehearsing and what am I going to do and who's going to cook my dinner."

I think there's a natural understanding. It's either there or it isn't; that's all.

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Women in Politics Oral History Project

HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS PROJECT

Fay Bennett Watts

HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS: CHAMPIONING FARM LABOR CAUSES

An Interview Conducted by
Amelia Fry
in 1976

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FAY BENNETT WATTS

1969

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Date of Interview: July 1, 1976.

Place of Interview: On the deck of her home on Usonia Road near Pleasantville, New York.

Those Present: Fay Bennett and the interviewer.

Fay Bennett was interviewed as a part of the Helen Gahagan Douglas Unit of the California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project in order to get a clearer picture of that part of the farm labor movement to which former Congressperson Douglas was related. Bennett, when fresh out of college in 1937, at first worked in organizations seeking to keep the United States out of war, but when World War II hit anyway, she changed the focus of her efforts to the domestic issue of farm workers, such as the observance of a Sharecroppers Week.

In 1942 she married Rowland Watts and "had babies for a few years," four to be exact. Nine years later (1951) she began working with the National Sharecroppers Fund, one day a week in the office and one at home. Her commitment and ability increased her work load and a year later she became Executive Secretary, responsible for public education and year-round fund raising for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. In 1958 Bennett and the National Sharecroppers Fund created the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor and held the first public hearings on farm labor issues in 1959. That was the point at which she and Helen Gahagan Douglas first worked together in a field in which each had been advocates for two decades. A follow-up hearing was held in Washington in 1964, the year that the 1950 Public Law 78 (to renew the importation of Mexican farm workers and thereby keep that labor market flooded) met its death in Congress.

In the late sixties the NACFL dissolved as the organizing era of Cesar Chavez and others began. Bennett went to Israel to study land programs in 1969 and the following year she stepped down as executive director of the National Sharecroppers Fund.

Her house, where the interview was held, is a one-hour train ride from New York City's Grand Central Station. Bennett, taller than average and with blonde hair that was mostly white, met me in a Volvo station wagon of no recent vintage. She had a special type of beauty: clear eyes and a vigorous, healthy

look that was affirmed by the bright print top she wore over her pants. Ninety acres of woods are the site where Bennett and her husband joined in a cooperative with approximately forty families to buy the land and build homes. Here they reared their children, in a cedar--or perhaps cypress--house designed by an architect who later headed the Yale School of Architecture; next door, invisible through the wealth of trees and shrubs, is a Frank Lloyd Wright house. The walls of the Bennett house were oiled and waxed, inside and out, and beginning to glow in a patina of age. Windows and decks take advantage of the country hills scenery, and we chose a picnic table on a front deck off the generous kitchen and living room as the locale for our interview. The quiet of the woods was disturbed only by New York-Boston flights overhead occasionally; we simply waited silently until the plane passed.

Midway through the interview Bennett prepared the lunch; Watts washed dishes afterwards, a taking-turns arrangement they have followed since the forties. The two have always maintained separate careers which tended to be quite close--she as head of the sharecroppers fund, he as attorney for the Workers Defense League. Bennett commented, "Even when he was counsel for the NACFL hearings, most committee members didn't recognize we were married."

The lunch, at a table in a side garden (with a fish pond under the guardianship of a baritone frog) combined delicious soup, fresh fruits, garden salads, bread, and butter she makes herself--part of the whole picture of her belief in more food production through small family farms, although her produce comes from a small garden, not a farm. She is still active in this movement.

During the interview she was eager to give as clear a picture as possible of the effort in which Helen Gahagan Douglas was interested, from the focal point of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor. She was not reticent, but not convinced she should emphasize her own role. Pre-interview research was based on a rather spotty chronology of farm labor legislation, Paul Taylor's oral history interview*, and a summary of federal farm worker bills from the Douglas papers. To this Bennett contributed several pamphlets which are alluded to in the interview.**

*Paul S. Taylor, California Social Scientist, Volume II, Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, 1975, pp. 123-125.

**Report on Farm Labor, Public Hearings of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, Washington, D.C., February 5 & 6, 1959. Also, Poverty on the Land, A Report on the Public Hearings Held by the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, Washington, D.C., May 18-19, 1964. Also, Agribusiness and its Workers, the National Committee on Farm Labor, New York, October, 1963. Also, The Grape Strike, National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, New York, 1966. Also, Louisiana Story 1964, National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, New York, 1964.

After the taping, the office review of the transcript at the Regional Oral History Office was delayed while other interviews in the Douglas series were being edited. The manuscript was sent to Bennett December 20, 1977-- just in time to get laid aside in the confusion of a large family Christmas. "The children were here and my hands were full" she apologized in a letter June 27, 1978. While in Vermont during the summer of '77, husband Rowland had been injured in a fall on a rocky outcropping and his stint of recuperating rather actively at home made Bennett busier than usual. Although we had planned to dispatch her review of the manuscript together with another visit to her home the summer of '78, that trip did not work out, so in September 1978, she returned the transcript to Berkeley, with pictures. When the pamphlets we had used for the taping could not be located, Bennett graciously sent others, rare though they are becoming, and the transcript was finally ready to join the others in the series.

The interview remains only a teaser of what should be a full memoir of a significant leader in the movement toward more power and equality for the farm laborer. It is regrettable that no projects on women or labor history have taped a complete oral history of Fay Bennett. There is still time.

Amelia R. Fry
Interviewer-Editor

April 1979
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley

III HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS: CHAMPIONING FARM LABOR CAUSES

[Interview 1: July 1, 1976]
[begin tape 1, side A]

Beginnings of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor

National Sharecroppers Fund and Southern Tenant Farmers Union

Fry: Tell me when you first got to know Helen; we can just take it from there.

Bennett: All right. My association with the National Sharecroppers Fund, farm labor, and rural poor people began in 1951, when I became the executive secretary of the National Sharecroppers Fund. At that time, I'd heard of Helen Douglas.

I'd actually seen her in a meeting that I'd attended some years before that. It was not about farm labor. It was a big meeting in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, in their grand ballroom. She was on the dais. I think she presided. It was a meeting about Africa and South Africa. Did you know about that? Her relationship to that?

Fry: No, no.

Bennett: I can't remember the name of the organization, but it was an organization that had to do with justice for blacks in South Africa. I think Jan C. Smuts was the prime minister then. He was supposed to be a good person.

Fry: This could be something that she got into as a result of her work with the United Nations.

Bennett: It probably was. I believe she presided at that meeting. She was a beautiful woman up there. She still is, as you know. She's a very impressive person. So that was my first visual sight of Helen, and knowing something about what she did.

Fry: What was this meeting? Do you remember what was determined?

Bennett: Well, I don't know the name of the organization, or whether it was sponsored by one, or whether it was the United Nations. But it had to do with South Africa. Jan Smuts was one of the speakers. I think that he was against apartheid, as I recall. I think that whatever the party was--maybe he was of the liberal party. I really can't say about the politics. There was a beginning wave of the group that's been in power ever since. You know, the Afrikaners, who believe in "separate and unequal," which they call apartheid.

Fry: Then you didn't see her again until--

Bennett: Until 1959. The Sharecroppers Fund was started to work with small farmers in the South. It first started to work in the thirties, when the New Deal program began under President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt. The first farm programs were begun to try to hold up farm income. Price supports were given to farmers in exchange for their producing less. You remember, they were plowing under cotton and killing baby pigs! That meant they didn't need the sharecroppers and tenant farmers on their land.

So here were these people who were suddenly off the land, even though the law said that it should not hurt them and that they should all share equally; it wasn't done in the South, with the landlord still kingpin. You had a situation which was like slavery, except that instead of being slaves, the former slaves were landless workers.

The owners had the land; former slaves and other landless people became sharecroppers who worked the land. With the coming of the A.A.A. [Agricultural Adjustment Administration] and price supports for producing less, you had a lot of people pushed off the land. They were living on ditch banks; Eleanor Roosevelt got interested and sent army tents to house these people.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union was formed in 1934 in Arkansas by a small group of black and white sharecroppers. Later, in 1937, National Sharecroppers Week was started by prominent liberals, in the North mainly--Eleanor Roosevelt, Mayor [Fiorello H.] LaGuardia, Paul H. Douglas--quite a group of people. It was to let the public know what was happening. I got interested in that. They raised money and collected clothing, and tried to let people know what was happening, and protested about what was going on. Then the National Sharecroppers Fund was formally incorporated as a year-round organization in 1943 to conduct year-round fund raising for STFU.

- Fry: There was a committee founded in California in 1937 by the Douglasses and a half dozen others, to aid migratory workers there. Were you aware of that at the time?
- Bennett: No, I had just come out of college then.
- Fry: You were focusing on the South anyway.
- Bennett: Well, I wasn't working in this until '52.
- Fry: Not at all before 1952?
- Bennett: No, I had just gotten out of college in '37. I was working to keep America out of war. I was active in organizations against war. Then when we got in the war, I switched to working on the home front to preserve democracy at home. That's when Sharecroppers Week was going on, and I became active in that. Then I got married in '42 and had babies for a few years. In '51, I started working with NSF when my children were young. I started working one day a week at the office and one day a week at home, increasing my work load time right along.

First Hearing, February 5-6, 1959

- Bennett: Then the National Sharecroppers Fund started the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor [NACFL] in '58, and the first public citizens' hearings were held in '59, which is the first time I had personal contact with Helen.
- Fry: Were you at all connected with the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, which resulted from a bill that Helen Gahagan Douglas introduced June 3, 1950? It wasn't reported out until March 26, 1951, after she had left Congress.
- Bennett: I remember that report very well. It was followed up by Senate hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor under Hubert Humphrey's chairmanship.
- Fry: Yes.
- Bennett: I forgot who was chairman of the President's Commission, but I knew.
- Fry: The chairman, I think, was Maurice T. van Hecke? [Spells name]

Bennett: Yes, that's right, that's right. He was it. That's just when I came in, when that report was coming out.

Fry: Right. Were you at all involved in that?

Bennett: Well, no, not really. It was a Senate committee hearing, except that I guess we supplied some witnesses for it and then publicized the report. That was our function at that stage. We took the material that came out of it and publicized it to the public.

Fry: You must be referring to the report of recommendations of the commission--

Bennett: --and then of the committee--

Fry: --that came out in '51.

Bennett: Yes.

Fry: Let me put a footnote on that. It's Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, 1951 (Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Printing Office, Washington, D.C.).

Bennett: Now I believe that the first thing the Sharecroppers Fund did at that point was to take that report and summarize it into a little pamphlet--I don't have it any more--for wide dissemination, because otherwise, when these reports were done they were put on a shelf to gather dust, if you want to use the cliché, and that was it! Our job was to try to make these live, to try to stir people up with them, to publicize them, to take these vast tomes and put them in fewer words, and get the recommendations, and try to whip up interest to bring about change.

Fry: So then you and Helen first worked together starting in '58?

Bennett: In '58, or actually '59. In October and November of '58, the committee [NACFL] was in the process of formation. It was formally launched in February, February fifth and sixth, when we had our first public citizens' hearing. Helen was a member by that time, so I would say that she was on it from the beginning, yes.

Here is a report on those public hearings that took place in Washington at the Mayflower Hotel. That was just a couple months after it began its formation.* There's a picture of Helen, right there.

*Report on Farm Labor, Public Hearings of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor; Washington, D.C. February 5 and 6, 1959. Deposited in The Bancroft Library.

Bennett: Let's see--that's Norman Thomas, and Frank P. Graham, and A. Philip Randolph. This man, Dr. Luther H. Foster, is the president of Tuskegee Institute. Some of these people are dead now. There's Helen, and Bill [William L.] Batt is there. He was a good friend of hers. Bill Batt was Commissioner of Industry and Labor for the state of Pennsylvania at that time.

Fry: And they were all on the committee.

Bennett: Here had been these public commissions and senatorial hearings which had issued all this material, and nothing happened! We decided that the citizens ought to get in the act. We had a hearing too, just like the government did. We got witnesses, and they were questioned by counsel; my husband [Rowland Watts] and Dan [Daniel H.] Pollitt were counsel. Then we published a report.

But we had citizens. A lot of people came to listen. We had growers testify, we had farm workers testify, we had clergy people and citizens' organizations, and anybody that knew anything, or cared. We got them all into the act. Their testimony is in here, truncated, of course. And then we came up with a group of recommendations.

Fry: You were head of Sharecroppers Fund at the time?

Bennett: Yes, and I was also the executive secretary of this [NACFL] organization. NSF started that. It was a kind of sister organization of the National Sharecroppers Fund. It didn't have its own office or staff.

Fry: Why was Helen asked to be on this?

Bennett: Because of her leadership in this whole thing, because of what she'd done in California. She was one of the first to notice that there were migrants there. She talked about how the controversy in California wasn't what to do about these people who were working hard and producing food for peoples' tables and getting none of the benefits of any social legislation. The question they were asking was, "Were they there?"

People were saying, "Who are you talking about? These aren't our people." They were living under bridges, and in all kinds of little out-of-the-way places. Helen Douglas and some others went out into the fields to look for them and found them, and said, "Yes, here they are." So we knew about her role in all this. I think she helped bring Mrs. Roosevelt onto the committee.

Bennett: There's Frank Graham and A. Philip Randolph and John Seabrook, and [James P.] Mitchell. [Showing photo] He was Secretary of Labor under [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower.

We came out with a group of recommendations--findings. We were trying to get tax-exemption status, so we didn't call them--we didn't want to say--"Here's our program," like we were going to start lobbying. We thought we could get tax exemption as an educational organization. But we never did get it, so then we went all out, and we lobbied. As it was, we were trying to do it kind of subtly, by saying, "Here, look what we found; now you citizens take these and do something about it."

Fry: Oh yes. Here on page thirty-six are your findings--

Bennett: Right. The intervening pages give you some very good material about what is happening.

Fry: Sitting on the committee, was Helen one of the ones who asked questions and so forth?

Bennett: Yes. Counsel would lead off with questions, and then the committee members could ask questions, and she would.

Fry: This was modelled after congressional committee hearings?

Bennett: That's right, but it was a citizens' hearing.

Fry: How did you get some of the more recalcitrant people to appear? You didn't have power of subpoena, I guess?

Bennett: No, not at all.

Fry: Did some just simply refuse, some of the growers?

Bennett: The Farm Bureau [American Farm Bureau Federation], which was [laughs] the notorious organization of the hard-fisted growers, came because they knew this was going on. They knew that the "right" side was being heard, the workers' side was being presented. They felt they had to present their side. They didn't have to come, but they wanted to come.

We had a congressman who asked to come, because he owned a couple of lemon fields in California. Talk about conflict of interest! He wanted to come and say, "What you're talking about is a lot of nonsense!" In fact, he got into the Congressional Record, afterwards the fact that this was a strange organization, that the staff had one Fay Bennett, and she wasn't what she was supposed to be at all. She was really a married woman!

what would happen to agriculture if wages were to rise. . . . And I think the place to start is with the Federal minimum. . . .

"Secretary [of Labor] Mitchell is going to speak, and I hope he is going to speak about one of these things. Last year there were between eight and nine million placements made by the Federal-State Employment Service. Now, this doesn't mean nine million people — a lot of them were placed again and again, over and over again. But I think it's entirely within his province to say that the public facilities shouldn't be used unless there were some very reasonable minimum standards."

Another grower²⁸ had a protest for the Committee's consideration:

"I have watched with concern — indeed horror — over the years as a concerted effort is made to inflame an unenlightened public against the American farmer. He is systematically blamed by these people for starting and propagating nearly every social ill of the century.

"Because he must mechanize to produce more efficiently for a rapidly expanding population, he is accused of throwing people out of work.

"In operations where mechanization can't be employed and he must depend on human labor, he is blamed for the hard work these people must perform.

"When he efficiently uses the land to produce the best possible crops, he is accused of creating local seasonal labor shortages necessitating migration of workers.

"If the workers bring their families, the farmer is accused of exploiting the breaking up of homes.

"If he builds housing for his workers, he is accused of regimenting human beings into labor camps. If he doesn't build housing, he is accused of neglecting his workers." . . . and as for those workers

"Generally, migrant laborers know no trade or skill. Educational attainment is usually very low. So we are dealing with the uneducated, unskilled, industrially untalented members of communities who have the choice of seeking such agricultural work as can be obtained by travel or becoming for many months of the year — if not for the entire year — public charges in their home community.

"We growers do not wish to deny to any qualified farm workers the opportunity to travel under safe conditions, to live in a house consistent with his standard of life, to work for wages which will afford him the opportunity to be compensated adequately for his efforts and to be protected properly from the hazards of occupational injury. . . .

"While I will readily agree that farm workers' income level is low when compared to industrial workers, one has only to look at the farmers' steadily decreased gross realized income to see why this is so. . . . American farmers who are now receiving only 90 per cent of what they received in 1947 for their product and who only retained 31.8 per cent before income taxes as opposed to the 50.4 per cent which they retained in 1947 are now paying wages 25 per cent higher than they did in 1947.* Industrial management, however, receiving prices 33-1/3 per cent higher than they received in 1947 are paying only 75 per cent more than they did in 1947. Obviously the farmer is caught in the cost-price squeeze and the industrial employer is not. . . ."

* It might be pointed out that in 1956 and 1957 this meant an average wage of \$5.90 a day, and less than \$900 a year.

²⁸ John Zuckerman, California Growers Farm Labor Committee, Stockton, California.

of that kind, I don't think there's any question but what the farm job ought to be paid considerably more than the industrial job. . . .

"Would prices go up if farm wages went up? Would there be an enormous burden on the consumer?" Mr. Seabrook asked.

"Well the first thing I think we want to think about in this regard is that despite the widely-publicized opium of price supports, a great amount of farm products — particularly the things that you eat — are still traded in a completely free supply-and-demand market. And there are hundreds of thousands of producers producing for that market and competition really works. Most farmers are theoretically in favor of free enterprise, but they wish competition didn't work quite so well in the market place.

"Now, I suspect that if farm wages went up substantially, prices would start up. And, as I say, I think most honest consumers, when they think about it, wouldn't complain about this too much; nobody really wants to think that his food bill is based on somebody else's poverty. But I also suspect that prices wouldn't move very much, because as prices started up and competition came into play, more efficient producers would quickly drive prices down again. . . .

"Actually, in any period of rising wages, management is always produced to get more efficiency. Secretary Benson, in his letter [to the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor] today, spoke of that. And this is



Speakers at the dinner of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor: Standing, left to right, John M. Seabrook, A. Philip Randolph, Mrs. Helen Gahagan Douglas, Dr. Frank P. Graham; seated, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor James Mitchell, Senator Eugene McCarthy had been called away to the floor of the Senate.

Fry: With a different name!

Bennett: Yes! From him, coming out of California, where there are a lot of women even at that time--using their maiden names, obviously.

So you see, we were a threat. When we had our first hearing, we heard afterwards that the growers were fearful. They thought a mighty movement of people was going to roll over them. Unfortunately, we didn't meet their expectations. But we did cause quite a stir. We didn't have enough money to really do everything we wanted to do. But there's no question that from this time until Cesar Chavez's union [United Farm Workers of America] was formed, state citizens' committees were set up, made up of the same kind of people we had on the national level--educators, religious leaders (Catholics, Protestants, Jewish--we'd get them across the board), labor people, good people. People of good will. They were working on state issues, as well as trying to get the people in the state to work on national issues, related to farm labor. In our Information Letters, we would tell people about the national issues that were coming up. There might be regulations or there might be bills in Congress.

There was a state citizens committee in California, the California Citizens' Committee on Farm Labor. There was one in Texas, one in New Jersey; in New York state, in Illinois, Indiana, and Florida. A lot of states. We had a full-time field representative at one point, who was organizing state citizens' committees. At one point, we gave money to some of the committees to help them move along. We'd give a few thousand dollars to them. They would have some staff and offices of their own.

They began to work on the state legislatures to get protective legislation for farm people, things like workmen's compensation for workers injured on the job, things like minimum wages.

In California, there was special legislation for children and women. A special commission was set up in California, just to take care of women and children. Women and children needed some special protection. Then I guess women's lib came along and said, "No, we all want to be equal." I'm not sure what's happened to that commission.

Fry: I wondered if they spread the protections to include men.

Bennett: Well, I think they probably have by now. Of course, Chavez's union has done the most to get rights for the workers, to get the wages up, and get sanitation in the fields--previously they never had a toilet in the fields!--to have decent hiring, better conditions, better wages, and better everything else.

Fry: Ernesto Galarza came along. Was he a part of this?

Bennett: Yes, he was here. I think there's an index of all the people that participated in that first hearing, at the end of the report. There he is, Ernesto Galarza.

Fry: [Reading] Secretary-Treasurer of the National Agricultural Workers Union.

Bennett: That was the predecessor of the other.

Fry: The Farmworkers Union?

Bennett: Yes.

Fry: How did you get along with the union?

Bennett: You mean the National Agricultural Workers Union, which before that was the National Farm Labor Union, and before that, it was the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The Sharecroppers Fund was set up to find money and support for the union, so we were their guardian angels. Not guiding them in terms of platform, but supporting them. We got along very well. Our job was to help publicize what they were trying to do. H. L. Mitchell was involved.

Before the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor was on the scene, the National Sharecroppers Fund attempted to do what it could. The time we're talking about is after the '54 Supreme Court decision on segregation [Brown vs Board of Education]. Then in the early sixties, when you were having all the civil rights movement activity in the South, black people were beginning to stand up for their rights. You had sharecroppers and tenant farmers who wanted to register to vote being put off the land again, living in tents in Tennessee.

The Sharecroppers Fund's job was to help them. That's why the advisory committee [NACFL] was set up, to kind of separate the two, and to have another organization that could work on farm labor and migrants. The idea was to just give it a new spurt, to spark new interest. We got an editorial in the New York Times. It really stirred things up, with those public hearings.

Fry: February 23, 1959 was the date of NACFL's editorial in the New York Times. You got pretty good publicity.

Bennett: Yes, the New York Times gave us several editorials, and printed our letters to the editor.

Bennett: Helen played another role at this hearing. One of the people, one of our supporters, named Joyce L. Kornbluh produced a slide show and narration, showing the history of farm workers in this country all the way back to the nineteenth century to show what their life was like. It was a very moving presentation, which Helen narrated to the large dinner audience on the evening of February 5, 1959. We had a public dinner on that night.

There were hearings for two days. That first night we had a big dinner, at which the Secretary of Labor, James P. Mitchell, spoke, and then Congressman Eugene McCarthy spoke. (He'd hardly been heard about then!) John M. Seabrook, who was president of Seabrook Farms and a big grower, spoke. There is a picture of the dinner speakers. Helen Douglas introduced Mrs. Roosevelt, who made a small speech. Frank P. Graham and A. Philip Randolph were co-chairmen of NACFL. As it says in the report, Eugene McCarthy left for a roll call. He made his speech first and had to leave. So if I've got more than one of these, would you like some of these reports?

Fry: I would like to have this. I think that would be good to file along with your interview.

Bennett: We [the NACFL] really used the quotes from the people. We'd have a few lines, and then we'd quote from what was said. It's really the essence of what was in the report. Then the findings. We'd give you the facts, and then the recommendations. They go together.

Fry: You developed a consensus with such recommendations as "The use of public employment facilities of federal-state employment systems should be restricted to growers whose wages, housing, and working conditions meet minimum standards."

Bennett: Yes, on the matter of recommendations [indicates bottom of page 37], this was, you see, where we were hoping that people would act on these propositions which were presented for the consideration and action of the American people.

Fry: You mean in state legislatures?

Bennett: State or federal. Some of it's federal.

Membership and Activities of the NACFL

Fry: In your lobbying, did Helen play a role?

Bennett: There was one bill that came up at one point sometime in the sixties, in the early sixties. I forget what the legislation was. She was to testify on our behalf. Just before she was to go down to Washington, Melvyn called and said that she was flat on her back with terrible back pains. Her doctor said that she was to be in a darkened room and she wasn't to go out, she simply couldn't do it. We had to get somebody else. I think we got [Rev. Walter E.] Fauntroy. You know the present Congressman-at-large from Washington, D.C.? Fauntroy? He was one of our committee members. The first members were selected by the NSF board, then NACFL members elected others.

Fry: How was Helen at helping you get publicity?

Bennett: Well, quite good. She was a very busy person, and did a lot of other things, too. She attended NACFL committee meetings, and held meetings at her home for likely supporters and media people. I remember she helped in trying to get money, because that was a hard thing to come by. The committee did not have tax exemptions. Then, we lobbied. I remember one meeting that she and Frank Graham and I had with Jacob Kaplan of the J. M. Kaplan Fund. Dear Dr. Frank Graham. I don't know if you knew him.

Fry: No, just that he was the head of--

Bennett: He was a dear man. He had been president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for years, when he was the liberal voice in the South, way before any of this was going on. Also, as a Presbyterian layman, he was active on these concerns. Then he was appointed to fill an unexpired term of somebody [J. Melville-Broughton] in the Senate by FDR. Then he ran for re-election to the Senate seat [in 1950]. The day before the election, the opposition came out with something like "Frank Graham believes in integrated education," and had a picture of him eating with a black man in the college dining room. That knocked him out. It was also charged that he believed in socialized medicine and a few other things. It was a very unfair attack on this wonderful person.

He was also appointed by FDR to the War Labor Board [1942-45]. He was the public member of the three-man War Labor Board all during the war that took care of labor disputes so you wouldn't have strikes in defense industries. There was also a labor member and an industry member. The stories they tell about Frank Graham's role in that--he's a remarkable person.

- Bennett: One of the joys of my life, in working with this organization, has been the people that I've been associated with, people like Frank Graham who was a very active chairman of NSF, and co-chairman of NACFL, A. Philip Randolph who just is one of the dearest--he's still living--one of the dearest people. You know who he is. He was president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a vice-president of the AFL-CIO. He's a grand old man of the civil rights movement. And Eleanor Roosevelt, who testified for us at hearings, and who I'd go pick up in a taxi. She was such a dear, sweet, gentle but forceful person. And Helen Douglas, who just is such a warm human being, you know! I'm sort of a driving person. I get going on an issue and I just think this is what has to be done and I assume that everyone will fall in line and do his duty or her duty. In a way, I was amazed when I found people--it was all very subtle--who found time for showing warmth and humanity. (I don't want to make myself out to be a terrible ogre.)
- Fry: You don't quite seem like one. [Laughs]
- Bennett: But there was that. I was pretty driving, and I was very zealous on this program, because of the injustice and what wasn't being done.
- Fry: There has to be someone like that to keep the machinery moving. What would you do with the members? They were called in only for things like hearings, or did they have a more continuous role?
- Bennett: The committee met periodically and decided what to do, and decided on program. One of the meetings was at Helen's home, and we had lunch. The people came from all around: One of them was Dr. Robert Coles, who's written a number of books about children including migrant children; Frank Graham and Norman Thomas, and Steve Allen, the humorist, and Dr. Edwin Dahlberg and Reverend Fauntroy. We had quite a group of people representing all the religious groups: Monsignor George Higgins, who was a leading Catholic in Washington and in social justice, and so on; Archbishop [Robert] Lucey in Texas. They didn't all come to all the meetings, but you had a core that came. They would decide policy and program, and figure out what to do.

The committee operated fairly loosely.* Since it worked out of the offices of the National Sharecroppers Fund (at 112 East 19th. Street, New York, N.Y. 10003), and shared its telephones and staff, it operated on a small budget. In addition to myself who served as executive secretary of NACFL, there was usually one other staff person who was responsible for writing the Information Letters, working on pamphlets, publicity.

*Most of the files, correspondence, minutes of meetings, copies of Information Letters and reports are in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 48202. This material is all available on request.

Check-Up on Farm Labor

The National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor has done a signal service by calling public attention to the plight of farm employees in the United States through its recent conference in Washington. Those who attended were given a truly moving picture of how many such employees have to live—especially the sharecroppers and the migratory workers.

For example, the committee reported that the average daily earnings of a hired farm worker are about \$6, compared with about \$17 for employees in manufacturing, and that the wage gap between them has been growing with the years. Moreover, farm workers are excluded from the benefits of virtually all social legislation and are not guaranteed the legal right to union organization and collective bargaining. Furthermore, the hundreds of thousands who follow the harvests suffer from the lack of the right to vote and the use of community welfare facilities which permanent residents enjoy.

While the work of the committee is research and public education, the Washington sessions have raised the public pressure for badly needed action. They also made a useful exposure of what that action should be. Most encouraging was Secretary of Labor Mitchell's support of a Federal minimum wage for migrant farm workers and his assurance that Labor Department studies necessary for the drafting of such legislation would be ready during the second session of the present Congress. Promising, too, was A. F. L.-C. I. O. Secretary-Treasurer Schnitzler's report of a federation plan for a campaign to organize the employees of large corporation farms.

All workers on the nation's farms should have the same protection as do workers in our factories and mines—not only through unions of their own choosing, but by Federal and state law. Anything less is not only unfair to them but a downright public disgrace. It is good to know that the N. A. C. F. L. will continue its check-up on the situation and on what is being done to meet it.

Editorial
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- * McAllister, Bard. Director, Farm Labor Project, American Friends Service Committee, California
- McCarthy, Senator Eugene
- Mackay, John A. President, Princeton Theological Seminary; Treasurer, National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor
- * Metcalf, Representative Lee
- Mitchell, H. L. President, National Agricultural Workers Union, AFL-CIO
- Mitchell, James P. Secretary of Labor
- Morse, Senator Wayne B.
- * Muñoz Márín, Luis. Governor of Puerto Rico
- Noakes, Frank L. Secretary-Treasurer, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, AFL-CIO, and Chairman, United States Section, Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee
- Peterson, Helen L. Executive Director, National Congress of American Indians
- Pollitt, Daniel H. Law School, University of North Carolina
- Randolph, A. Philip. President, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, AFL-CIO; co-chairman, National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor
- Rony, Vera. National Secretary, Workers Defense League
- Roosevelt, Mrs. Franklin D. Member of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor
- Schnitzler, William. Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO
- Seabrook, John M. President, Seabrook Farms Co., New Jersey
- Senior, Clarence. Chief, Migration Division, Department of Labor, Government of Puerto Rico
- Simcich, Walter. Former Research Consultant, California Farm Research and Legislative Committee
- Slith, George. Farm Worker, Arkansas
- Thomas, Norman. Member of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor
- Thornton, Rev. K. P. Director, Migrant Missionary Fellowship, Pompano Beach, Florida
- Triggs, Matt. Assistant Legislative Director, American Farm Bureau Federation
- Watts, Rowland. Staff Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union
- Woodbury, Mildred Fairchild. Chairman, National Child Labor Committee, Bryn Mawr, Pa.
- Wright, L. Garth. Secretary-Treasurer, Bahamas Federation of Labor
- Zuckerman, John. California Growers Farm Labor Committee, Stockton, California

* Individuals who were not present but who submitted statements or material presented by others.

write for additional copies of this report to the
NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON FARM LABOR

112 East 19th Street • New York 3, New York

Bennett: There were no power struggles within NACFL. The committee members really liked each other and had respect for each other. It showed when they came together and they had a hard time tearing themselves away from their discussions about what else was going on that they cared about. It was a gentle and loving group if you don't mind my using words like that. All the members cared. They were all important people in their own right; none needed to use the committee to put himself/herself forward.

Some of the members really only lent their names. We did not have money to pay the members to attend committee meetings. Hence attendance was of those in the New York area. Also since they were all such busy people, it was nigh impossible to find a time when more than a handful could attend.

The persons who were closest to the committee's work, who came most frequently to meetings, were Frank P. Graham, A. Philip Randolph, John A. Mackay (when first elected to the committee, Dr. Mackay was president of Princeton Theological Seminary; subsequently he retired and went to live in the Washington, D.C. area but he still came to committee meetings. He was treasurer of the committee. "Pete" Hudgens was elected assistant treasurer so tht we'd have another check-signer when Dr. Mackay wasn't available), Robert W. Hudgens, William L. Batt, Jr., Helen Gahagan Douglas, Herman B. Herman, Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, Norman Thomas, Josephine Wilkins.

Half a dozen or so would come. Most consistent were Graham, Thomas, Hudgens, Mackay, Douglas, Randolph. They usually began by talking among themselves about what was going on; sometimes they reminisced about the past. Then they would get down to business when I gently reminded the chairman that time was moving along and we had better discuss the business at hand. Sometimes the committee met for lunch at the UN dining room, once at Helen's for lunch (Dr. Coles came that time as well as Josephine Wilkins [from Georgia] who happened to be in town). Sometimes the committee met at our office.

They discussed reports we were working on, bills in Congress, how to get money to meet our expenses, hearings, strategy, how to get more mileage with our program. They reviewed finance reports. But mostly they left the running of the organization to me.

I started to tell you about getting money. (I divert myself.) Helen Douglas and Frank Graham and I went to see J.M. Kaplan, who was president of the J.M. Kaplan Fund. Do you know about him?

Fry: No, I don't.

Bennett: Well, he's known. You know, the West is quite far away from the East!

Fry: Yes, especially with foundations, we've discovered! [laughs]

Bennett: J. M. Kaplan is a very interesting man who's in his eighties, and he walks twenty or thirty blocks from his home to his office, still. He started out, I guess, as a shoeshine boy. As he says, his son went to Harvard through the front door, but he went to Harvard through the back door, selling newspapers. He started developing grape orchards for Welch's grape juice. He is the founder of the Welch grape juice empire, and Welch's grape jam and so on. He became a multi-millionaire.

Early on, he decided to retire and use his money for good causes. He set up the J.M. Kaplan Fund of which he's president. When he decided to leave the business--his aspect of it was getting the grapes from the grape growers, who produced it for his factory--he set up a cooperative. He got the farmers to organize a cooperative, and they still own the whole operation. He's very much in favor of people running their own affairs through cooperatives.

He was very interested in our operation. We went to see him, to see about getting some money. This book on Eleanor Roosevelt by Helen had just come out.* I had my copy, which we showed him. He loved it, and he asked Helen Douglas to autograph it for him, so I gave him my copy! [Laughs] It is such a great book. I had to get another copy, which she then autographed for me.

Fry: [Reading inscription] "To Fay, with admiration and affection."

Bennett: You've read this, I'm sure. It's a great book. It includes one of the pictures from our public citizens' hearing. It tells a little bit about Helen's role on farm labor, and Mrs. Roosevelt's role.

Fry: When you went to see Kaplan, were you seeking funds from his foundation?

Bennett: Yes.

Fry: Did you have any luck?

Bennett: Well, the thing is, he really couldn't give it to the organization, because we didn't have tax exemption. They had to give to tax-exempt organizations. Then when we published one of our reports,

*The Eleanor Roosevelt We Remember by Helen Gahagan Douglas, New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

Bennett: which was a purely educational thing, he could contribute toward the educational aspect. I think that when this report was at the printers, and we couldn't afford to get it out, he gave us a couple of thousand dollars.*

Helen's role on the report was as a reviewer. As we produced the text material we would send copies to a committee of the NACFL for review; we would then have meetings on "was this the way we ought to be saying it." So committee members did have a hand in it.

Fry: Did she do some editorial work on it?

Bennett: I don't know that she had direct editorial work on it, but her input is there, through the discussion.

Fry: I wish I'd had this a week ago.

Bennett: I hope I've got some more copies. Now that I'm not at the office any more, I don't have the files at my fingertips. But I did manage to bring some of the materials I worked with home with me.

Fry: We are preparing to do interviewing in our office on farm labor. I wonder if we can still order this.

Bennett: We gave thousands of copies of that report to Chavez's union without charge. They use it as a fund raiser. I'm sure they have it, and that you can get copies from them. You know, they're right out there in California. I'll find it for you, but it's there.

We published things like this--we published the first report on the grape strike.** Remember the famous grape strike? That's out of print.

Fry: December 1964 it all started, right?

Bennett: I was out there when the grape strike was just beginning. The AFL-CIO executive council was having a meeting in New York. Organized labor contributed to the work of NACFL and I went to California to check on farm labor activities first-hand so I could make a report to the executive council. They weren't doing the job.

*Farm Labor Organizing, 1905-1965: A Brief History, published by the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, July 1967.

**The Grape Strike by the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, February 1966.

Bennett: We were doing it, and educating the public, and saying to labor, "Now, look. You're good guys, you ought to be helping us do this job of educating the public, and rousing the public on the injustice." We would get money from Walter Reuther's industrial union department. He was much more sympathetic than some of the more traditional labor leaders. Then after getting ten thousand dollars from the IUD [Industrial Union Department (of AFL-CIO)], we'd go to George Meany of the AFL-CIO and get a matching contribution from the AFL-CIO.

[end tape 1, side A; begin tape 1, side B]

Fry: What about the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union?

Bennett: I don't recall that we got any special help, except that when the grape strike was on, Chavez's union solicited the Longshoremen's Union's help in not loading and unloading grapes to foreign ports. I think they did.

Fry: They cooperated?

Bennett: I'm not sure that the international union took an official stand, but many of the local seamen's groups did. There may be something in this pamphlet about that. This is a fascinating thing, and it gives you all the details. "The Grape Strike." The strike had been going on a couple of years.

At this time neither National Sharecroppers Fund nor National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor had any office in Washington. We depended on our labor friends, other lobbyists concerned with farm labor, and especially the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor (a coalition of some thirty-six national organizations with an interest in farm labor and rural life), which NSF and other organizations set up in the early fifties. NSF was an important contributor (financial) to NCALL, and NACFL was also a member organization.

NCALL would alert us when some bill would be up for hearings and we (NACFL) would send a representative to testify. Also we would alert our mailing list through our Information Letters and action letters when letters were needed to congressmen on a particular piece of legislation of concern to farm workers.

While we were all working together, I guess it's fair to say that there was some feeling of competition between NCALL and NACFL. I think we both claimed credit for the defeat of P.L. 78. Actually it was a cooperative effort that did the job. The church groups were very much involved. But NACFL supplied the ammunition. We prepared the printed reports, the one-page flyers, that other groups could use in large quantities to get action from their members.

Bennett: To go back to any feeling of competition that may have existed between NACFL and NCALL, I would say that it was more on their part than on ours. Our role was unique. We were doing a job that no one else was doing. NACFL was just a committee putting out material, calling for action, lending the prestige of its members for the cause of farm workers. NCALL was a coalition of other organizations. Any competition wasn't a matter of chest-thumping but was based on the necessity to raise money for the program.

NCALL received \$100 dues from each member organization. If there were thirty-six groups, that made \$3600 a year, hardly a dent in anybody's budget. Some gave more, like NSF which contributed \$1,000. But unions were the major givers, to both NCALL and NACFL. Hence the competition was for money support. NSF, on the other hand, went back several decades and had a large mailing list of supporters who gave regularly.

Another group that played a role in the lives of migrant farm workers for decades was the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches. But until political action to change conditions for farm workers came along in the fifties, the role of the Migrant Ministry was mostly conducting church services in the migrant camps, providing milk for children, and running day care centers. They provided these important services, but they didn't dare call attention to the bad conditions in the camps or to the need for protection of farm workers under law for fear that the growers would shut them out of the camps. But after NACFL and NCALL came upon the scene, they moved along with the times, and did try to work through the churches to get letters to Congress and to get local churches interested in the migrant stream that might pass their areas. I know that they used our flyer on P.L. 78 in great quantity to mail to their local church groups to get action.

Fry: Another pamphlet here is called Agribusiness and Its Workers. You published that in October of 1963.* Then you have one here called Poverty on the Land, which is a report on the public hearings.**

*Agribusiness and Its Workers, National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, 112 East 19th Street, New York, N.Y., October 1963. Deposited in The Bancroft Library.

**Poverty on the Land, A Report on the Public Hearings Held by the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, Washington, D.C., May 18-19, 1964.

Second Hearing, May 18-19, 1964

- Bennett: Five years after our '59 hearing, we had our follow-up hearing. This one was at the Statler Hotel in Washington. This hearing was similar to the other one in 1959. This time, we included farm workers and small farmers. It was the same format of a public citizens' hearing.
- Fry: And was Helen in this hearing?
- Bennett: I don't think she was here. I think she was in England at the time. That was too bad. I don't think she was there. There's a picture of it. [shows picture, pages 42 and 52 in report, Poverty on the Land] I don't think she was physically present. There is the dinner that we had in 1964. Sargent Shriver was our main speaker. That was on the eve of the founding of the anti-poverty program in the Office of Economic Opportunity. [President Lyndon B.] Johnson had just come in, and he appointed Shriver as head of his task force on poverty. The legislation that we suggested for farm workers included four key programs which became the cornerstone of OEO's program for migrant workers. It never got passed legislatively, although we kept trying and trying. Finally we got it administratively, through the OEO program. Shriver laid it all out.

The four key migrant provisions were, I believe, housing, adult education, education for children (or perhaps just day care), and health. These were a package of four migrant bills that came out of Senator Harrison A. Williams' Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor but were never passed. Then OEO came along and incorporated these four programs into their larger program for migrants. Lots of funds were funnelled into these migrant programs by OEO.

Yes, Senator Williams ("Pete" Williams, we called him) was one of our friends. So was the counsel for his subcommittee, Fred Blackwell. We also had friends in the Farm Labor Service of the U.S. Department of Labor. And then under President Eisenhower, a President's Committee on Migratory Labor was set up, to coordinate the functions of all the government executive branch that had any relation to migrants. This included the Labor Department, HEW, Agriculture Department, and I'm not sure who else. This committee had a small staff and we were in close touch with the director whose name I cannot remember.

Later on there was another person we worked closely with. He was David North and I believe he was a special assistant in the White House on the bracero issue.

Bennett: We also worked with people in OEO, and NSF got funded for a major training program in Georgia and Tennessee that provided leadership training of local people, and program development.

Before that we had a contract with the Labor Department for training hardcore rural unemployed in six southern states: Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana.

These developments came after the dissolution of NACFL.

There's Randolph [in picture], who presided, and there's Frank Graham, and me, Sargent Shriver, Norman Thomas, but Helen was not there. I don't think Mrs. Roosevelt was--I think she was in California. We were having a terrible time! Getting a date when everybody can come is impossible! Helen was still with the committee until it disbanded.

Fry: I was under the impression that she and Melvyn kind of worked together on farm labor in the fifties and sixties. Did that not occur here? Melvyn's the one who first got her interested in it in the thirties.

Bennett: Yes. Melvyn had been a supporter of the Workers Defense League that my husband had been involved in. Then during the sixties, I think maybe his health wasn't so good. He was to have narrated a film, which the Sharecroppers Fund produced several years ago, called "Start All Over Anew." I asked Helen to narrate it, and she said, "Oh, a man's voice would be much better," and she got Melvyn to agree to do it. Then he had a heart attack and he couldn't. So I think his health was a little precarious.

I don't mean to say that he is feeble. He isn't. He's very vigorous, and he's now very active. But I think that before his heart attacks he was doing so much, he was acting so much, that he simply couldn't do everything. I think he was on Broadway constantly. I think that was the thing. I think they probably had a little pact, that since he had to work not only on evening programs, but matinees also, he would be the "star," and she would do this sort of thing.

Fry: What about that slide show that Helen did narrate? That's not recorded anywhere, is it? Do you have a script?

Bennett: We had a tape of that. We had a script, and a tape, and we would sell those around to groups as something they could do,, for ten dollars. Where that is now, I don't know. We had a mimeographed script, so that somebody could read it. We encouraged groups to put it on, because it was so good. We had copies made of all of the slides. It was a little package, part of our educational

Bennett: package. I think we had a cassette of her narrating it, so people could use her narration and the slides, or if they wanted to, they could have their own narrator, by having the script.

You know, when an office closes down, it's kind of what happens to history! [Laughs] Our [National Sharecroppers Fund] office, for years, and years, and years, was in New York City, at 112 E. 19th Street. We moved around, and got bigger and bigger and bigger offices, but we moved everything with us. Now our office has moved to North Carolina, to Charlotte. It's all closed down up here. Our legislative office at 1329 E Street, NE, in Washington, D.C. is closed now, too.

A lot of our material is in the files on microfilm at Wayne State University in Detroit, including all the stuff of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, and the Sharecroppers Fund, and the Migrant Children's Fund, our third group. If there's anything specific that you want like correspondence with Helen Douglas or her files, we gave them most of our files that they wanted, and they took a lot of that sort of material. If you'd like anything from the archives, there is a man there who knows all our material. Call him. He's been most cooperative about giving us whatever we wanted. If you wanted, as I said, correspondence with Helen Douglas or anything related to her, he'll fish it up for you.

Fry: I'm sure that people who will be researching on her will want to know about that.

Death of Public Law #78

Bennett: I would think that in most of my relations with Helen, we used the telephone! [Laughs] I don't think there was much correspondence.

Fry: That's why I'm talking to you. [Laughs]

Bennett: That's really true. I can remember one telephone conversation I had with her. One of the bills that we at NACFL were most active on was trying to stop Public Law #78. Does that ring a bell? That was the bill under which the United States imported Mexican labor. Public Law 78 was terminated in 1964. It developed during World War Two, when there was a shortage of farm labor, because so many men were drafted into the army. Mexicans were brought in, first under some kind of a regulation, and then it was formalized into a law, so that there could be some protection.

Bennett: The law said, for example, that they had to have a minimum of fifty cents an hour! Even in the forties, fifty cents an hour wasn't very much for backbreaking work like that. They were supposed to have a few other perquisites that were in the law about their food and lodging and so on.

Well, laws are only as good as their enforcement, and these laws were not very well enforced. The hearings are full of information of how the farm workers, or braceros as they were called, were robbed on their paychecks! Ernesto Galarza has written books on this sort of thing. At the end of the week, they get a paycheck with fifty cents, or thirty-eight cents, or something. They had all these deductions for room, and lodging, and this and that. They'd end up with nothing. They couldn't speak the language, and if you didn't like it, get back where you came from.

Fry: Well, if I understand it correctly, one of the problems with this public law was that it was administered under the Department of Labor.

Bennett: Yes, it was under the Department of Labor.

Fry: In the fifties, farmers would get the labor statistics to show that more labor was needed, and therefore this would enable them to import Mexican laborers, and not give the jobs to the Mexican-Americans already there.

Bennett: Yes, there was a stipulation in the law that before you could import anybody, you had to show that there was a shortage. Well, heck! There's always a shortage if you aren't offering anything. If auto workers were offered a dollar an hour, there'd be a heck of a shortage. Then we could say, "Well, let's import Canadians," you know. It was the conditions under which they were establishing their standards that made it so difficult.

Changing the law, moving its administration to the Immigration Department didn't help it any, I don't think. There were some who thought if we lost Public Law 78, it wouldn't be any better. But all of the forces working on behalf of domestic farm workers, including Chavez and all his people couldn't organize, with this constant stream of Mexicans across the border who were much poorer, and willing to work for nothing, under the most terrible conditions!

Every two years, the law came up for renewal. The excuse was that there was a war on. The war ended, and the growers thought they had a darn good thing going, and they weren't about to give it up, so they kept it. Congress kept extending it. We still had a "shortage" every two years.

Bennett: Finally, there was enough pressure, and enough city congressmen got interested. It was no skin off their backs to defend farm workers. They didn't have big growers in their communities that would see that they didn't get elected. It was because of people like Congressman [Benjamin F.] Rosenthal from Queens, who's a real good person. He's still in the Congress. And there are some other good congressmen and senators from the industrial areas who knew that this was holding back all labor to have cheap labor like that. It was hurting the small family farmer, whose labor was pitted against this underpaid foreign, exploited labor. It was hurting family farmers, who had to compete with these big growers who could have this cheap labor.

Finally we got the law defeated, by about one vote. It was just before a holiday, when there weren't so many legislators there; they didn't know that it would be defeated or they'd all have been there. Anyway, when we got that bill defeated, I remember talking to Helen Douglas on the phone, and I was jumping up and down. I was saying to her "WE WON! WE WON! WE WON!" I must have really sounded like somebody let loose! She said, "Wow, you sure are excited!" or something like that. It was just that she is somebody I could talk to like that, to give vent to my feelings of exuberance, because we never expected to win anything. We were always knocking our heads against the wall. We knew we had to do it for moral reasons, but somehow never expected to win, because the forces against us had so much power.

Fry: Was Helen able to help any in this? Would she contact her former fellow congressmen or anything like that?

Bennett: We had a meeting once, in her apartment on Riverside Drive, for fund raising and for publicity, I remember.

Fry: Can you hold it just a minute until this plane goes over?

[Pause for jet noise]

Bennett: It hasn't been too bad, has it, out here on the deck? It's worst at eight o'clock in the morning and five o'clock at night, when the commuters are going home.

She did invite a group of people to her home. I remember one of the people who came was one of her friends from California, a producer, Dore Schary. It was a small group of people, for a small reception, cocktail party kind of thing. Some people from the New York Times came; I remember a writer from the Times, Gertrude Samuels came. Helen gave us her stationery for the invitations, and we sent them out. It was her party.

Bennett: She did what she could. She was very active on disarmament and peace. She spoke a great deal, and traveled a great deal, and went to Latin America, at the invitation of one of her fellow members on this [NACFL] committee, Robert W. Hudgens.

Fry: He was the assistant treasurer of the NACFL at that time.

Bennett: Yes. He was very active with our committee. He had been in the administration during the New Deal days, with the Farm Settlement Administration. He was at this point working as the director of an organization, which I think the Rockefellers or some other foundations were sponsoring. I've forgotten the name of it--the Foundation for International Development, I think. Their role was to work with countries in Africa, and Asia, and Latin America who needed help and wanted help. They'd come to them and say, "Give us some help--technical help--and a little money to do something."

He helped sponsor a trip that Helen made to some of the countries in Latin America. She got a lot more material--grist for her mill of speeches. She was in tremendous demand, and still is! She's very good.

Fry: Yes, I wondered if she did a lot of speech-making for you in other places.

Bennett: I don't know that she particularly just spoke for us, but she would weave this material into whatever she was talking about. I remember once, five, six, seven years ago, she was on one of the major Sunday television shows. A nation-wide thing that goes on for several hours. The host had several guests, and she was one. Her picture was in the Sunday [New York] Times as one of the featured guests. I think it was a Sunday night that she was on. She asked me for up-to-date material on farm labor so that she could bring it up. And she did! She made it a point to bring this up. They might want to talk about glamorous issues, but she would bring these things in. She was certainly up-to-date on all aspects of the problem.

I remember when A. Philip Randolph introduced her at the first public citizens' hearing dinner, when she narrated this great program. He talked about her when she was a congresswoman, and said that she was one of the people we could always rely on. He was talking about civil rights issues, way back before it was the popular issue, before the sixties or the fifties. He said that she was someone who always did her homework. Usually you have to go through the aide, and the aide would tell the congressperson. I'm sure that she had plenty of aides and needed them; but the thing is, she knew it herself. She was thoroughly briefed on everything. She did her own reading.

Fry: That's what I understand.

Bennett: She was unique in knowing what the issues were and being able to talk about them very articulately.

There's another story about her in the fields. When she was running for the U.S. Senate in California against this terrible [Richard M.] Nixon, who was using the dirtyest tactics against her, I think that she knew she was lost at this point. There wasn't time to counteract all his pink innuendoes that were based on such falsehoods. One of her meetings was scheduled with farm workers in the fields. The only way she could get to them was, I think, by helicopter--or small plane.

Fry: Yes, she was using a helicopter in that campaign.

Bennett: Yes, a helicopter. It was late. She'd been late at another meeting, and they were waiting in the fields for her, and thought maybe she wouldn't show, because after all, were they very important? What power did they have? But she showed! When the helicopter dropped down, their expressions when they saw her, and their cheers, and her relationship with them showed she cared!

Dissolution and Successors in Farm Labor Organizations

Disbanding of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor

Fry: When did your office close? I have it here you dissolved it in 1972.

Bennett: I went to Israel in '69 with a delegation to study Israel's land programs and cooperatives for farmers and so on in their kibbutzim. That was in '69. I stepped down as executive director of the Sharecroppers Fund in 1970, and the NACFL had disappeared a few years before that. NACFL dissolved in 1966, '67, or '68. (The exact date will be found in NACFL minutes at Wayne State University's Walter Reuther Library Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.)

Bennett: We kind of ran out of money. When the Chavez union came along, we thought that now that there was a union to represent farm workers, they didn't really need a public group. Of course they really did. It would have been good to have a public citizens' group

Bennett: continue to give support and publish literature that was unbiased. Of course, we had bias towards farm workers as people, and as workers that needed protection, but we weren't their mouthpiece. We were a citizens' group, so we could have kept on doing that. But by that time, the burdens on the Sharecroppers Fund were so great, and money was hard to come by. We just decided--the committee decided--to dissolve. Helen was right there at all the meetings when that was decided.

For one thing, there were new groups starting up. There was the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, and there was the Office of Economic Opportunity which Shriver headed. There were all these programs that OEO took over that we had been pushing for. One of these was education for migrant children. Another was housing for migrants. There were grants and loans for migrants to build their own housing. A law was passed that gave 90 percent grant money and one percent interest for loans, I think, or something like that, to farmers or groups of farmers to build decent housing for migrants. There was a training program with stipends to farm workers, to get training so they could leave the migrant stream, or get some training so that they could supplement the farm labor income they got. In addition to training, there was a health measure. There were many migrant health programs started during that period that migrants and farm workers themselves, with some help from the staff that they employed, could deal with for themselves. So we felt that they were on the way.

Then there was Chavez's union, and there was the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty that had a strong interest in this, which Walter Reuther's organization, UAW, had started. I was on the executive committee of that, and Frank Graham was on it. I'm not sure that Helen was. That's one of the reasons that we dissolved the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor. But it was done in an orderly way. It didn't just peter out. The committee met a number of times, and it was done by committee votes and so on.

We published Information Letters right along, mimeographed five-page National Advisory Committee Information Letters that were very good. I don't know if I have any of those around here or not. They went to a large list of, oh, five thousand people, key leaders all over the country.

National Campaign for Agricultural Democracy

- Fry: Did the people who were on your committee also overlap on the Sharecroppers Fund?
- Bennett: Some did, like Norman Thomas and Frank Graham and A. Philip Randolph and some others.
- Fry: I see. But Helen didn't?
- Bennett: No. She was special on that.
- Fry: What about the interests of the people who were on your board, like Helen. How did they channel their activities in this area after the committee was dissolved?
- Bennett: Well, I have a hunch it was directly toward support of Chavez's union. Another group was set up which we helped form, the National Campaign for Agricultural Democracy [NCAD], in Washington whose sole purpose was to try to get farm labor covered under NLRA [National Labor Relations Act]. All the groups working for farm labor decided, pretty much, that the days of an outside organization that was supporting a group really didn't make as much sense as giving the group power to take care of themselves. That was the idea. This group of farm workers were workers, and they deserved the same rights of organization and protection as any other group of workers, if they had coverage. You see, they were exempt from the NLRA. I was on the executive committee and there was a staff person for NCAD.
- Fry: You were on the executive committee as a non-farm worker?
- Bennett: Yes. It was a coalition of organizations supporting farm labor, not made up of farm workers themselves. We were moving along, and had a bill in Congress. But then Cesar Chavez became opposed to it. He decided that it would restrict them too much--their right to secondary boycott and such things.
- Fry: That issue has reared its head before in labor history and produced disagreement between labor groups who otherwise agreed in their objectives.
- Bennett: So that was too bad.
- Fry: What did you do then? Did you drop it?

Bennett: We dropped that Campaign for Agricultural Democracy. It was dissolved, because that was its sole purpose, to have coverage. Here you had labor pushing for it, and the organization of the farm workers saying no they didn't want it, unless they could roll back the clock and have it the way it was when the Wagner Act was first passed [1935]. They didn't want all the restrictions that had been written into the law subsequently. They said that labor really got organized at the beginning, in the thirties and forties when they had the law, before all the restrictions came in. They didn't want to have to come in under the restrictions which they felt would have hampered them too much.

Fry: Someone has reported a congressional hearing report in the 1950s--I don't know the exact date--in which a minority report authored by [Richard] Nixon inferred that the farm workers were pink, although he had not attended any of the hearings.

Bennett: The farm workers were what?

Fry: Pink.

Bennett: Pink?? [Laughs]

Fry: This may have been before you entered the picture, before '58. You draw a blank on that?

Bennett: Yes. But don't forget I entered the scene in 1952 as executive secretary of NSF, which gave strong support for farm workers.

Ernesto Galarza

Fry: Did you see Ernesto Galarza as a sort of new breed of labor person when he came on the scene?

Bennett: As having been an academic with a Ph.D.? Yes, he was. He was a splendid person, with his academic background. He could have had security on a college campus, but he chose to throw his lot with this group, the National Farm Workers Union. He worked in Louisiana and in California. He was a man of the greatest integrity and intellectual background.

Fry: Did he bring changes in the direction of the movement, as a result of his being a person with a different background?

- Bennett: I don't know how to answer that. H.L. Mitchell is certainly a man of integrity, as the founder of the National Farm Workers Union. Cesar Chavez is certainly a man of the greatest integrity. So I don't know. A lot of the young people working with Chavez's union are college-educated young people. Maybe some of them have Ph.D.s. I don't know. I have a hunch, as I think about it, that everybody attracted to this movement was someone who did it not out of self interest, obviously.
- Fry: My question was just one of your general impression, whether Galarza changed emphasis in strategy, to lawsuits against [Joseph] DiGiorgio. Was there any difference in the way--?
- Bennett: I don't know what his role was in that, frankly. There was a lawsuit in Louisiana, against the strawberry workers. I don't know.
- Fry: My colleague is doing an oral history with him.* She is interested in how he was looked upon from your point of view.
- Bennett: He published a study that he did about the braceros, Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story [Charlotte, North Carolina: McNally & Loftin, 1964]. Actually, there's a little error in that. That's something Frank Graham told me. [Mimicking] "You can't afford one tiny error, because the forces of oppression will grab on it, and blow it up, and say, 'See? You can't believe anything they say!'"
- Fry: And discredit the whole thing.
- Bennett: Discredit the whole thing. I remember one little thing, a slip of paper that was a paycheck or something. It had some little error in it because the farm worker didn't explain it right or something, and they tried to discredit the whole thing in the Congressional Record, and give Galarza a bad name. Oh, it's just disgraceful, just disgraceful!
- They can just sit back and not do anything, and then wait for people--"do-gooders," as they said--to come along who "didn't know what they were talking about."
- Fry: Do you want to take this opportunity to correct that error in Galarza's book?
- Bennett: Oh, I think it's been done a long time ago.

*Tape-recorded interview with Ernesto Galarza in progress. Conducted by Gabrielle Morris, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

- Fry: It was taken care of then, in subsequent publications?
- Bennett: I thought you were going to say, "Do you want to take this time to stop and have lunch." [Laughter] Are you getting starved?
- Fry: I'm doing just fine, and so are you!
- Bennett: I guess this hearing report is one when Helen wasn't present, the second one. You might want to look at some of these while I fix lunch.
- Fry: This is the May 18-19 hearing in 1964.
- Bennett: Five years later. That was the first hearing, this is the second. This is a little capsule of the second hearing. [Tape turned off until after lunch]
- Fry: Do you want to add a little here on what Helen's priorities were in her work?
- Bennett: Well, I think that during this time that I knew her, her major interest probably was the arms race. She certainly knew a lot about the arms race, and what was happening--countries making money selling arms to other countries, and getting them into fights and using up the arms, and the danger of world war.
[end tape 1, side B; begin tape 2, side A]
- Bennett: Farm workers and migrants were always close to her heart, too, so it never became not important to her. I think that whenever she made a speech anywhere, she would bring them in, even if that wasn't what she was supposed to talk about. She'd bring them in. Things were interrelated. She would bring in interrelationships. After she came back from Latin America, she talked about our food abundance in this country being the "wonder of the world." Those were her words. And how we could offer food as a carrot, to help Latin American countries improve their own conditions and get out of feudalism into the modern world.

She was catholic in her interests; her knowledge in all these fields was vast. She tied it all together, like in that television program that I mentioned. She can probably remember that one, though she's been on a lot of them. You know, now she's being asked to speak before women's groups because they're so conscious of her as a woman, the fact that she was doing all these things with a husband and children [laughs], long before women's lib was dreamed of. They're interested in her, and they want her to talk about women's issues,

Bennett: but she's not just interested in women's issues per se, she's interested in people! She ties it all in. She's just a great woman, and a warm person. I don't know what else to say about her.

Fry: You mentioned to me, over lunch, the party that she gave, when you decided to leave the committee.

Bennett: Well, actually, the party was given by the board of the National Sharecroppers Fund in 1970 when I retired from NSF and I guess they asked her if they could have it at her house. I guess she said yes, because that's where it was. The whole thing was catered by a new group, the Domestic Workers Union. I'm not sure if that's just what it's called. Somebody from the Sleeping Car Porters--Ben McLaren, a very fine black man who worked for years with A. Philip Randolph, and who works with the Workers Defense League, is helping to organize the domestic workers in New York City. You know, maids. [Pause for jet noise]

So they catered it. The women made all the stuff, all the hors d'oeuvres, and took care of everything so Helen wouldn't have to bother with any of that. One of the unions contributed liquor. It was just a great party, with a lot of people there, from small farmers from Mississippi to one of the guys on our staff, John Wilson, who is on the city council in Washington, D.C. now, and board members from all over the country, including Appalachia and Georgia and Tennessee--all around. It was a great party!

Melvyn and Helen were there, and their daughter Mary [Helen Douglas] was there. We just had a very nice time. There were a few little speeches. Anna Arnold Hedgeman presented the award to me and Helen and I gave little talks. Vera Rony, who was on our board--Vera R-o-n-y--is a great gal. She's a fantastic gal who has a lot of stories to tell. She at one time was executive secretary of the Workers Defense League. Then she went on to be assistant to the vice-president at [State University of New York at] Stony Brook, on compliance, to see to it that they hired blacks and women and so on. Now she's got a sabbatical, and she's in Atlanta. She's working on textile problems, the textile workers union, and the textile industry. She's on the board of the Sharecroppers Fund.

The National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor came along at a crucial point in the struggle of farm workers to achieve their rights. Up to that point there had been action of course. There had been the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, later to become the National Farm Labor Union, and then another name change to National Agricultural Workers Union, the DiGiorgio strike, strikes in Louisiana of sugar cane workers and strawberry growers, et cetera. The work of the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches. There were other voices too. Government commissions.

Bennett: So when the NACFL was formed and our first public hearing held in Washington in 1959, it created quite a stir. We heard from our friends that when they went to government offices about the concerns of labor, they were given the kind of welcome they hadn't been used to. People became interested--from government personnel on down. Local groups were formed--state citizens committees.

Bills were introduced into the Congress. P.L. 78 was defeated. This gave a great impetus to the organization of California farm workers under Chavez. Organized labor became more interested, gave its moral, political and financial support.

The issue of farm workers and migrants came into the public domain. Then OEO came along and put money and programs where they were needed. Money went into the hands of migrant leaders in many parts of the country. Support groups grew. Editorials were printed, some pro, some con.

So we did a lot. So did others.

But where are we? There has been great progress in many places --California, for example. But the life of migrants remains harsh. Their protections are few. So you have the long march of Ohio tomato pickers recently; arrests and jailings in Arizona.

Attitudes Toward Women's Roles in Social Movements, 1950s vs 1970s

Fry: Looking at this from the present-day vantage point of women's lib, there were you and Helen and Eleanor Roosevelt as major people on this in the late fifties.

Bennett: Anna Arnold Hedgemen. There were a lot of other women too, I guess. You know, it's interesting, I ran this organization for so long and never thought about women's lib, and never had any problem with congressmen or others. I testified a lot myself before government agencies and public hearings and so on, and it wasn't until a lot later, in the sixties, when the civil rights movement began that a lot of those young people, black and white, began to be awfully chauvinistic!

You'd be amazed! They didn't know why women, especially older women, were doing anything. And older white women? It was amazing! I began to have the kind of repercussions that I really didn't anticipate, and didn't even know were there, because I was so unused

Bennett: to anything like that. I was raised with real equality in my youth. In the liberal movement of the thirties, and in the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement--Bayard Rustin and Jim Farmer were close friends. We all grew up together. There was no question of black and white, male and female, you know!

Now there's a cleavage among all. It's amazing.

Fry: Who was chauvinistic?

Bennett: The men.

Fry: The young ones?

Bennett: The young ones.

Fry: Who were getting interested in the farm workers' movement?

Bennett: Well, they were on the staff on the Sharecroppers Fund. They'd been in the civil rights movement. They'd been in SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]. There's a lot in this. A lot of the young women quote one of the male leaders who said something like: "The only place for a woman is prone." Haven't you heard that? That came out of that. It's just incredible.

Fry: Did this create difficulties for you as a leader?

Bennett: Yes.

Fry: They actually opposed the fact that you were a woman?

Bennett: Yes. By that time, I never thought of myself as any special age. I was vigorous and active, and still am. I wasn't terribly old. There became that problem, the age problem. They were in their twenties. I was in my forties.

Fry: That you were over forty was their complaint?

Bennett: That I was over thirty!

Fry: So there was that age gap, too.

Bennett: It's amazing. Not everybody thought that way, but there was a group. I'm sure they've learned since.

Fry: I've heard this from other organizations in the late sixties, too, from the young women in it.

Bennett: Yes, they're the ones that really felt it. They were supposed to make the coffee and run the mimeograph machines, and sleep with the guys while they [the men] did all the heavy thinking. That apparently surfaced during the days at Columbia [University], the sit-ins and all that, and the Free Speech Movement, apparently, and in that period. It was amazing to me! I'd come through it all twenty years earlier, when we were all comrades together. We were for freedom. We practiced it, believed it!

Fry: Did you ever mention this to Helen?

Bennett: I don't think so.

Fry: She seems to have been equally unselfconscious about any sexism in Congress.

Bennett: Yes, here she was a pioneer, and just thought she was there because she could represent people! [Laughter] This is the way I was. Actually, because you accept yourself that way, you aren't aware of some of it.

I know that in some of the testimony I gave, there was a Congressman E. C. Gathings from Arkansas, who was a horrible character, southern. You know the old southern type. When they were being very polite, I thought that was just the way they were to all of their witnesses, but I was told later on that he was especially polite to me because I was a woman, and didn't ask me any hard questions because I was a woman! [Laughter] I thought I was there because I knew something and could contribute something. I wasn't aware, you know. The smallness of their heads wasn't where I was at.

Fry: Well, it's wonderful to get your viewpoint of the change from the forties into the sixties, because this contrast is exactly the picture that seems to be developing from other sources, too.

Bennett: I don't know what it's like now in the seventies. I think it's kind of going back again. One of my sons is now married, and Sandra, his wife, keeps her maiden name, and wants to be sure she's not going to be absorbed as Mrs. David Watts. They married themselves in Vermont. They put on the ceremony and the party and the parents all came and so on. And then her mother in Ohio put on a party, and Sandra was a little upset because the party invitations said, "Come and meet Mr. and Mrs. David Watts." She'd been swallowed up! I didn't do that. We had an announcement at our party for them and I said, "Come and celebrate the marriage of Sandra Schenk and David Watts," even before she told me that "for the record, I'm keeping my own name." I kept my own name.

Bennett: The thing is, Rowland's been on the board of all these things. Rowland was on the board of the Sharecroppers Fund all the years.

Fry: Yes, you said earlier that he was the counsel in the first hearings.

Bennett: You know, there were people who knew us very, very well during all this period, and didn't know we were married? We weren't trying to keep it from them, but we didn't cling to each other. We didn't sit together at meetings, or nudge each other, or somehow act possessive. We didn't deliberately not do that, we just acted ourselves.

Fry: You didn't ever have to counter rumors that you and he were having an affair on the side? [Laughter]

Bennett: No, most people didn't know there was anything going on. We went to one conference in the early sixties that the National Sharecroppers Fund sponsored in Bricks, North Carolina, which, as you know, is a rural place. One of the leaders there, when he introduced me at some point, said, "I found Fay Bennett and Rowland Watts going into the same bedroom together, and then I learned that Fay Bennett is Mrs. Rowland Watts! And he thought that was so cute. It never dawned on us. We were just so separate and equal as people that it didn't occur to us that anyone even thought we were having an affair. We assumed they knew we were married because we didn't try to hide it. We worked together because we were both concerned.

Fry: Yes, interested in farm labor. [Laughter]

Bennett: Just two people on the board. We might have left meetings together, but I don't know that anyone gave it a thought.

Fry: That sounds very much like Helen's attitude, too.

Bennett: And then raising the children—when we were at my "retirement" party from NSF in July, 1970, Helen and I talked. My daughter Linda was there, and her daughter Mary was there. We talked about the effect on the family. Linda could say that there were times when they were having to get their own meals and stuff, and she had her problems growing up. But then she said that there were strengths. Linda could say that. We're very good friends now, Linda and I.

Helen was talking about Mary, when she was five years old calling the operator for Congress, and saying, "I want my mother!" [laughs] That must have been a little hard on them. I don't think it was as hard on my children as it would have been if I'd been home all the time, wiping noses and keeping them apart when they were having a fight, and just being a hausfrau. That would have been terrible on them!

Fry: That's the other side of the question. Is that really an improvement?

Bennett: I'm sure that our children had a vision of their parents as two people that were very involved in what was going on in the world. They consequently became that way. They were very active in the civil rights struggles of the sixties, and they're very good human beings. They're just great people.

Fry: Well, on that optimistic note [laughs], I think we should close the interview.

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University of California
Berkeley, California

Women in Politics Oral History Project

HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS PROJECT

Walter R. Pick

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FAMILY AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE
OF HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS AND MELVYN DOUGLAS

An Interview Conducted by
Ingrid Winther Scobie
in 1978

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WALTER R. PICK

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Date of Interview: March 22 and 23, 1978.

Place of Interview: Walter R. Pick's real estate office, Studio City, California.

Those Present: Walter R. Pick and the interviewer.

Walter R. Pick offered special insights and information for the Helen Gahagan Douglas component of the California Women Political Leaders Oral History Project from two vantage points. As Helen Douglas's cousin, he could provide valuable information on the Gahagan family as a whole and on the private home environment and life style of Helen and Melvyn Douglas. In addition, he was their administrative aide in the late 1930s and an assistant in Douglas's congressional office in 1947 for a year and a half, which enabled him to comment on the Douglasses' professional lives.

The interviews took place in Mr. Pick's office in a real estate company where he had been working for the last several years. The agency's offices were tastefully decorated with handsome woven pieces on the walls. A friendly air pervaded the offices, and one could easily see how Pick enjoyed working there. Except for a lunch break together, an occasional telephone call, and the distant rumbling of traffic, the first two hours of interviewing proceeded uninterrupted. The third hour occurred the following day at the same location.

Mr. Pick was not only eager to cooperate and to record all that he could remember, but he also had a flair for details, which resulted in a very rich and important interview. His modesty permitted him to concentrate on Helen and Melvyn, but he seemed reluctant to discuss his role except with some urging.

Unfortunately, the time allowed only permitted concentration on the Douglasses, and there was little opportunity to explore Pick's rich and varied career in the theater, in particular almost twenty years writing and producing live shows for industrial conventions with his close friend and colleague, George Byron. Nevertheless, Pick's imaginative mind, keen sense of humor, and perceptive analyses of individuals clearly emerged in the course of the interviews, and one could well imagine his successes professionally.

Walter R. Pick died quite suddenly only several months after these interviews. The Regional Oral History Office has been most fortunate that George Byron has both willingly and carefully edited the transcription, always retaining Pick's style of speaking. In addition, as Byron also knew the Douglasses, he was able to fill in certain stories and even complete sentences where the tape was difficult to understand. The interviewer is most appreciative of Byron's help and support.

Ingrid W. Scobie
Interviewer-Editor

10 August 1979
University of California at San Diego
San Diego, California

IV A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FAMILY AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF HELEN
GAHAGAN DOUGLAS AND MELVYN DOUGLAS

[Interview 1: March 22-23, 1978]
[begin tape 1, side A]

Joining Forces with the Douglasses, 1937

Scobie: Could we begin with your giving just a brief chronology of your career? Then we'll go back to the period when you lived with Helen and Mel.

Pick: Okay. All right. Well, my father was an American army officer, and as a youngster I grew up as an army brat. We traveled extensively, and I lived in Manila, Honolulu and several major American cities. My father retired in Washington, D.C. and I went to George Washington University. And while I was there I was involved in dramatics--the Cue and Curtain Club, which was the dramatic organization. Then in 1933 I founded and managed The Roadside Theatre, seven miles outside Washington, D.C. This was a summer theater and it was very successful.

It was the first such theater in this area, which I am sure accounted in part for the excellent audiences we invariably had--frequently standing room only. Upon losing the lease on this building we opened another theater, and then a third, this one running for nine years. The third year I was offered a scholarship in New York at the New York School of the Theatre which I accepted.

This school was owned by a former associate of Helen's when she was at Barnard College--Elizabeth Grimball. When I left Washington for New York, I remained on the board of directors of the theater until 1941. During my second year at the School of the Theater, someone from RKO studios saw me in one of the school productions and strongly suggested that I come to California, which I did, driving Melvyn's car out.

Pick: Then when Helen and Mel arrived I stayed with them. But no activity at the studio. I'd go over to RKO and nothing would happen. I was frustrated and bored with this lack of activity, so finally I said to Helen and Mel, "I'm bored. Isn't there something I can do for you blokes that would keep me active, because I don't like this sitting around, waiting for somebody to give me a role in a film."

They said, "There certainly is!" Then is when I got involved in their lives. They called my role "personal representative" or "administrative assistant." They weren't too involved politically at the time. Helen then went to Europe and sang in opera, concerts and so forth. Then she came back. She was to do a concert at the Hollywood Bowl.

Scobie: Would this have been after she came back in '37 from her trip when she was so concerned about what was going on in Germany?

Pick: Yes. Anyway, she evidently had developed laryngitis on the boat, brought on by exposure during her nightly walks on deck. I feel that she was losing interest in singing. Also, she was terribly upset by the fact that she couldn't sing the music of Jewish composers anywhere in Germany or Austria.

Then too, while she was in Austria she was approached by an important member of the musical fraternity who suggested that, by virtue of her talent, wealth, and social position she could be a most influential friend of the totalitarian movement! That she consider doing some spying for the Nazis in her own country. Couple these facts with many other observations she made during this trip and it is small wonder that her voice was affected, and she was unable to sing. Even her beloved German lieder in which she had specialized to a great extent.

She had to cancel her Bowl appearance, which upset her greatly because she is such a totally professional artist. Well, Mrs. Leland Atherton Irish, who was the head of the Hollywood Bowl Association at the time, said, "But, Helen, you've got to come out and make an appearance," which we thought was ridiculous. But she came out, and she took a bow, and they explained her problem. She then went backstage, and two prominent singers from the Met took over the concert.

Scobie: You commented she got laryngitis on the boat. Do you think it was psychological?

Pick: Right. Right. She just did not want to sing. I remember her doctor came to the house. Doctors were making house calls then. She was trying scales, working on the voice but it just wasn't happening.

Scobie: Did she realize that this was in her mind?

Pick: Well, she's an extremely intelligent woman, and her throat doctor told her, "I think you could do this."

Scobie: What was the response of the critics?

Pick: What can you say when a singer has laryngitis?

Scobie: That's right.

Pick: That Bowl concert was to have been the springboard after her European tour--she'd done other concerts over there--going on to concentrating on opera. But the Bowl cancellation changed the entire thing.

Scobie: Did she completely abandon her music after the Bowl situation?

Pick: Not completely, no. Not completely. Because she had concert commitments to fill in this country. But it wasn't with the same great drive as before. She has had three compulsive drives in her life--one to be an actress, the next one to be an opera singer, and the third one to be helpful to people.

Scobie: Through politics and other areas?

Pick: Yes, in that way.

Life in the Outpost Home

Pick: When all this happened we were living at 326 South Hudson, in the older part of Los Angeles, in a big seventeen-room Spanish house which they rented, furnished. Helen took out the more unattractive pieces of furniture and re-covered the remaining pieces with lovely materials. Then they filled in the empty spaces with pieces they had in storage. The end result was quite handsome.

Scobie: You were living with them?

Pick: Oh, yes.

Scobie: Were you married at the time?

Pick: No. Came damned near it but got jilted--Patty was her name. Lovely girl!

Pick: Anyway, Helen and Mel started being interested in building a house in what I suppose you would refer to as an upper middle class area in Hollywood--the Outpost Estates. There were parts of Hollywood that Helen and Mel could live without--and who's to blame them! I remember when she was playing downtown Los Angeles at the Biltmore in The Merry Widow. And a short time later at the Philharmonic in Jerome Kern's The Cat and the Fiddle. She'd be driven downtown in a car with drawn shades because she disliked so much of Los Angeles. Parts of it were pretty ghastly at the time. And Mel was doing pictures. And Helen was doing a movie based on Haggard's [H. Rider] novel She. The only film she ever made. Frankly, the movie was not the greatest, but Helen got excellent reviews. As a matter of fact, it was revived not too long ago and the critics were in agreement that Helen was most impressive in her movie debut in the title role.

So anyway, they liked this lot in the Outpost, and they built a house, and the architect was New England, the builder was New England, the landscape architect was New England--because this was the atmosphere they wanted, combined with the best of California living. And it turned out to be an absolutely glorious house. In the meantime I would take care of her correspondence more than Mel's, because he had very little other than fan mail during this period.

I'll never forget the day they moved into the Outpost house. They couldn't place the furniture because the floors weren't finished. She hated wall-to-wall carpet, only tongue-and-groove hardwood floors. They started opening their barrels, and boxes of books which had been packed before they were married because neither of them had any place where they could open up and have a proper library. The living room was full of bookshelves. And one book after another that Helen would open from her barrel, and Mel from his would be the same title. A Walt Whitman book. Or Ulysses by James Joyce, and so on. It was very interesting!

Scobie: And they didn't have any idea?

Pick: No. They had talked about them--but I'm sure even they were surprised at the similarity in taste. Of course, Melvyn had worked hard for his collection. Helen had been born with a gold spoon in her mouth.

Scobie: What do you mean by that?

Pick: Well, her father was one of the biggest dredging engineers in America who had, it is said, filled in most of Long Island Sound. He didn't want her to go in the theater. And when he saw her drinking water out of a paper cup backstage one time, he said, "You can't do that, Helen!" He brought her a silver cup to drink from at the water cooler. In other words, she had been used to the best all the time, but Melvyn had come up a steeper path.

Pick: She was the star when they appeared in Tonight Or Never. In this play she was presented as a full fledged opera star, a role she carried off brilliantly, and with great success.

When David Belasco, the legendary producer, was casting the male lead in Tonight Or Never, he asked Helen if she would like to sit with him while he interviewed some likely prospects. She thought that would be fine. Among the actors auditioning was a young man she had never seen before. His name, of course, was Melvyn Douglas. No sooner had he hit center stage than Helen, seated beside the great Belasco, in the darkened theater nudges the producer and says, "I want him!" She didn't even know who Melvyn was. And that was all there was to that!

I'd like to point out the following fact. Sometime prior to this period there was quite some discussion around the country as to who were America's ten most beautiful women. Well, the distinguished critic, and journalist, Heywood Broun published a statement that Helen Gahagan was all ten of them!

All right, I'll tell you one more thing about that play. The show came to Washington, D.C. where I was living at the time, and I went to a matinee. I wasn't aware of the emotional feeling between Helen and Mel, not at all. I just thought this was an attractive and very talented actor.

Well, I dropped by her apartment between the matinee and evening performances, and while I was there, Mel arrived and they talked out in the foyer. And it wasn't a normal kind of mood, you know. [Laughs] Helen comes in the room after Mel leaves and says, "Well, what do you think of him?" And I said, "I think he's a conceited ass!" [laughs] Of course, I was jealous, too, because I had known Helen all these years. I could sense this thing was, you know, sparks between them. I never felt jealous later on with Melvyn, but at that particular time I did. As a matter of fact, I'm deeply devoted to him.

Well, back to the Outpost Estates house. They moved into the house and they opened the books and all that kind of thing, and we had a lovely life there. They were still not too involved politically.

Scobie: Who had the money to build this house? Helen?

Pick: Oh, they both had it. Melvyn was making very good money.

Scobie: He was doing well.

Pick: Oh, very well.

The House: Layout and Description

Scobie: Would you describe the house a bit more? How it was furnished, what it looked like, what colors she used.

Pick: Well, it was probably one of the most gracious houses I've ever been in. You came up--sort of an S-shaped driveway into a very large courtyard. There was a three-car garage there, and beside the garage, to the right, was an office with a built-in desk. It was very charming, in light woods. And besides room for the three cars in the garage, there was ample room for other cars when they entertained.

Scobie: Did they have three cars?

Pick: They had three cars. And then you came under a sort of porte-cochere between the house and the garage and up to the front steps. And they were very gracious, sort of zig-zagging up to the front door. And you were greeted by a very brightly painted front door, which was very cheerful.

Scobie: What color?

Pick: It was a sort of a red, but not that red of bougainveillaea. It was more subtle than that, and the walls of the house were gray plaster, so it was very charming. And then you came into the entrance hall. To the left was what we called "the telephone room." It was a small little den with a telephone. And there was a powder room across from that. To the right was a very gracious living room with a fireplace and lots of bookshelves, and a built-in sound system. And a record area in which to store records.

Then there were double doors into a rather large dining room that had a pine-paneled ceiling, with some very special relief work--not too ornate--and indirect lighting. So with this lighting and candles on the table, it was just great. And you could see out over the city from the living room and the dining room. And the lights at night were magnificent. Also there was a big front deck facing towards the city.

And then you went from there to a large pantry and then into the kitchen and the servants' dining room and two servants' rooms in the back. The house, or part of it, was L-shaped. [Seems to be gesturing on table, sound of mike being moved] Here's your living room here, here's your entrance hall here, and you go between the powder room and the telephone room, and this was Helen and Mel's suite. On the left was Melvyn's bedroom. You walk a little further

Pick: and this is Helen's bedroom which is fixed up more like a sitting room--very charming. The decor was more French Provincial than anything else. And it had a pink marble fireplace. I think her walls might have been blue, and Melvyn's something that would go with that. And of course they each had their own bath. She had a dressing room; he had a dressing room.

Then before you came to Melvyn and Helen's rooms, you turned to the left, and there was--what was the nursery, and that bathroom in which I had the problems with Mary Helen as a baby. Then you could go into the front bedroom, which had its own bath, but you could also use that other bathroom that had its own shower.

Scobie: Was that your room?

Pick: That was my room. The patio was all bricked around the pool, and there were eaves over and around the house so you could walk underneath them from the kitchen to any part of the house without having to go through the living room.

Scobie: What colors did she use inside?

Pick: Blues, as I recall. French Provincial colors, really. The colors you'd use in a French Provincial house.

Scobie: What kinds of things did she use to decorate the walls?

Pick: Well, they had a few pictures, and at one time Eddie Robinson loaned them a Renoir--when he was building his art gallery--which we hated to part with because that was over the mantle in the living room for about a year, and they had collected Käthe Kollwitz drawings, which were rather startling, grim, because they depicted the Nazis--the German thing against the Jews, anti-Semitism. I don't remember any other really important pictures they had.

Scobie: They didn't put a lot of money into collecting art, then.

Pick: No, they didn't. The house was so beautiful it just didn't need it. The living room walls were, of course, mostly covered with the books and some paneling. And Helen had bookcases in her room, too. They were avid readers.

Scobie: Money went more into books than artwork and decor?

Pick: I would think so. Well, they certainly spent a lot of money on their home, but very wisely. They had bought a French Provincial dining room set, and I think it only had six chairs and they had

Pick: four or six more copied. That kind of thing they did not stint on. Fabrics they spent an awful lot of money on.

Scobie: Did she select them all herself, or did she have an interior decorator?

Pick: Oh, no! No interior decorator around her! [Laughs]

Scobie: No?

Pick: No indeed. She didn't need them! She's like--well, I'm reading this book about Oscar Hammerstein. Helen was very much like Oscar's wife, Dorothy, Oscar's wife, about decorating, and Dorothy Ham is a very talented lady! It was smart, but very comfortable, and not at all ostentatious.

Scobie: Very much like the New York apartment.

Pick: I'm sure that most of the furniture from the apartment was in this house.

Scobie: Yes, because that is exactly the same way.

Pick: Right.

Scobie: You just feel like not moving. It's so comfortable.

Pick: Well, it belongs with their personalities. They didn't have anything just because it was an antique, that you couldn't sit on for fear the legs would break or something like that. Everything was functional.

Scobie: Did Peter and Mary have separate bedrooms?

Pick: First of all Peter and Mary Helen and Evelyn [Chavoor] had the room that was mine originally. Then, when Peter got a little older, for a while, he and I had to share the front bedroom.

Scobie: That must have been fun.

Pick: Oh, it was for him. [Laughs] Then I moved. I got an apartment over in Berkeley Heights.

Scobie: Why did you move out?

Pick: Well, I suppose it was when Mary Helen was born, you see. And then Peter grew older, and Peter had to have his own room. Also I wanted my own privacy. Because you can live too close to people, as much as you love them.

Scobie: Absolutely. Did you continue to have meals and so forth?

Pick: Oh, yes. I hardly ever went home until after dinner, unless I had a date.

Oh, I must tell you this--it's amusing, I think, and certainly presents Helen in a different light. One day, up at the Outpost house, Helen and I were involved in a project that was not only complicated, but worse still, tedious. However, we were getting there when another hurdle presented itself. Now it became a crashing bore. Silence descends while we concentrated. Suddenly, without warning, triggered by sheer frustration and sounding like a Marine drill sergeant, Helen rips off an "Oh, SHIT" that could shatter glass! I was startled but tried to act blasé.

That night at dinner with Helen and Mel I kidded her about this, saying, "Cousin, dear, you've got a better vocabulary than you displayed this afternoon!" She gives me her best "grande dame" look, and says, "Walter, no matter what they say, I am a lady!" Mel whooped and went right over and gave her a big hug. And this was our Helen, who doesn't even like off-color stories unless cleverly told, preferably by Melvyn.

Shopping, Cooking, and Mealtime

Scobie: Let's see. You said they had three cars--Helen had one and Mel had one, and the third?

Pick: They had a station wagon that they used for the marketing and that kind of thing. There was a very handsome Cadillac they don't make any more. That was a four-door, very simple black with white-wall tires, and then Melvyn had a gray Cadillac coupe and then the station wagon was a Ford.

Scobie: Who went out and did the marketing mainly?

Pick: Most of the time, the cook would, and the German brother, who was also the chauffeur, would drive her. When Helen went to the market --I meant to tell you this. Have you been to the Farmer's Market?

Scobie: No, but I know about it.

Pick: Well, there's one stand there that Helen just loved. Now, if Helen wants something, it doesn't matter too much what it costs. She hasn't had to worry about that. But she also knows how to juggle

Pick: a budget! She'd go on Thursdays, when the help was off, and she'd bring back enough food to feed a regiment, or so it seemed. She was that kind of--"Oh, aren't those apples beautiful! Oh, look at that pineapple!"--without any thought of what the menus would be.

And she was that way up in Vermont when I visited there. She'd go marketing and you know, steaks didn't faze her, and she never had to think of whether this was more expensive than something else she might have. But she was never overly extravagant, and she would not sit still for price gouging!

Scobie: They never had financial problems?

Pick: Never, that I know of.

Scobie: Who did the cooking for the family? Did she have a cook?

Pick: She had the most fantastic household help imaginable. We had a Russian cook. We had a couple from Southern Germany that had to be investigated by the FBI before they would allow them to come into the house when Mrs. Roosevelt was there. They were the butler and the maid. We had Evie, who was a Syrian.

Scobie: And she lived in.

Pick: Evie lived in. And we had a Spanish gardener. And a charming American gent to tend the swimming pool.

Scobie: Did she have this kind of help at the little house on South Hudson before you moved up to the Outpost?

Pick: Oh, yes. She had help there. But this was later when they finally got people who would live in. The Russian cook, she was brilliant! It's a wonder we all didn't get fat. And the butler and maid were marvelous, charming. They later worked for Cole Porter. I used to see him in New York when I was there. I accidentally ran into him at Rockefeller Center.

Scobie: So the kind of time that Helen had for the children was quality time, free of household chore responsibility.

Pick: Yes, but she could do household chores if she had to, and there were times without servants, in between servants, you know. And Helen and Mel liked to cook when the servants were away. Melvyn was a fine cook. Helen didn't like it quite as much as Melvyn.

Scobie: Did she plan the menus, or did the Russian cook?

Pick: Well, Melvyn did in the early years.

Scobie: Yes, but once he became established?

Pick: Then it was turned over to the cook, with supervision. The cook might come in and discuss--the way a lot of cooks do--with the lady of the house what she was planning for the day, and were there any suggestions that she might have? And nine times out of ten, Helen would say, "That's fine. Go ahead." But if it was a dinner party, then Helen would make suggestions that she knew would be particularly effective, and they usually were. She was, and is, a very astute and experienced hostess.

Scobie: Did she have any favorites that you liked?

Pick: Well, I know we all liked something that was very fattening, which was the little Russian meat-filled pastry, flaky--almost like puff pastry. Pirozhki, they called it. And we used to have those as often as possible, with cocktails or with soup or such. And they were rich, and worth every calorie count. But then she'd go on diets occasionally, and then there would be lamb chops and steak and baked potatoes, but not foisted off on everybody. She was never that type of person. But what's wrong with lamb chops and steak? She loves food and knows food and Melvyn also knows fine wines.

When the help was off, it was usually Melvyn that did the cooking, if he wasn't shooting, you see, or something like that. And they were off on, as I recall, Thursdays and every other Sunday. It would usually be a Sunday when Mel cooked. And he loved to cook. He was good, too, as many men are.

Scobie: He picked it up when he was a bachelor?

Pick: I think so. Probably.

Scobie: In her kitchen, did Helen always keep up with the new-fangled devices, buying electrical appliances and so forth?

Pick: She did not. She's not a gadgeteer.

Scobie: No?

Pick: No. [Laughs] I don't think so. I've never known her to say, "Well, I must get that," and fill the kitchen full of the newest items.

Scobie: You don't think she would have had a Cuisinart? [Laughs]

Pick: I do, but I'm not too sure about Helen. [Laughs] Anyway, they didn't exist then!

Scobie: I couldn't get along without my Cuisinart.

Pick: Mine is really a General Electric food processor. George is the cook, and uses it for everything.

Scobie: Tell me what mealtimes were like.

Pick: Well, we had very few formal luncheons. Helen was always dashing about someplace, the kids were probably off at school. You would eat out on the patio, or if the servants were off, you'd just go to the icebox and ad lib. But luncheons weren't a big time ever with them, for business or anything. The only luncheon I really remember they had was when Sam Goldwyn came, and that was just a very small one. I'll tell you about that later.

But dinners they had with that chef--oh! So the day was usually much too busy to take time out for lunch, and Helen has never been one to dawdle over a chef salad and idle chatter with the girls. She's never been that kind of person.

Scobie: What about breakfast?

Pick: Their breakfast was served to them in their rooms. Melvyn would be getting dressed for the studio and then Helen was served later, if she could sleep late, which [laughs] as years went on she couldn't, because she always had these political appointments often involving breakfasts and things of that nature.

Scobie: So they each had their own bedroom.

Pick: Yes, this house was planned with separate bedrooms because Melvyn always had to get up so early in the morning. He had his own bath, and she had her own bath. Her bedroom was treated like a sitting room, with a fireplace in it, and she had a French day-bed or chaise lounge designed for it in addition to a regular bed. And he had a big bed of bird's-eye maple. So there was a private suite for them in one end of the house.

Scobie: Did they sleep together?

Pick: Oh, I don't know. [Laughs] I wasn't peeking. But they've always been extremely happy together. And it's amazing because each one in his or her own way--had ample opportunities to become involved with others.

Scobie: Were they affectionate with each other?

Pick: Oh, yes. They certainly were. As I told you, there was an aura there of a happy home, much trust, much love. So everybody had the chance to grow.

Scobie: And you said there was no friction.

Pick: No friction between any members of the household or the servants, or such. Because usually, basically, that comes from the owners who set the tone.

Scobie: Now, what about the children. Did they eat dinner with their parents at all?

Pick: Well, you see, that house was designed so there was a servants' dining room. But it was never treated as such because most of the time Peter and Mary Helen ate there with the nurse, who was Evie [Evelyn Chavoor]. I don't remember them being at the dinner table too often, as a matter of fact, because they were still so young. They were three and five or six years old. Helen and Mel ate too late for little tots.

Scobie: When Mel would come home from the studio, would he have time to sit down with the kids or kiss them good night?

Pick: Oh, sure. He did all that. He adored them. The one thing he didn't do was discipline them.

Scobie: In terms of family decisions, how did Helen and Mel go about deciding things?

Pick: Well, you see, there were times when either one or the other had to make the decision, because the other one wasn't there. But if they were both there, they would discuss the situation thoroughly, even at dinner when somebody else was there, because they're not clandestine or secretive types in any way. They may have had a little friction about what each one thought, and it would usually be about the kids, and mainly Peter. Mary Helen was just a little angel, but Peter had a bit of the devil in him. But Helen and Mel worked as a team. If Melvyn wasn't sure he wanted to do a particular film, he would usually make up his own mind, but still they'd discuss it with each other, one professional to another, and Helen would read the script.

I read a lot of them. I'm sure I carried no weight, but at least my opinion was another side. I cued Mel a lot when he was learning his lines, and whenever they were together, it was a joint thing. But they had many decisions to make when Melvyn was away. I'm sure Helen had to make a lot of decisions that she couldn't wait to talk to Mel about.

Scobie: So when they were together, neither one particularly dominated the decision-making process.

Pick: No, never. Never.

Scobie: What about towards the kids? Did Helen usually win on those issues?

Pick: There weren't that many problems that I saw. Again, Evie could tell you that. I don't think either one dominated the other. That's why the marriage has lasted so long. Neither one of them liked to be dominant--in anything. Just to be there, to talk. A leader, yes, but not dominant.

Scobie: Tell me about dinner, the meaning of dinner, who was at the meal, and so on.

Pick: Well, it would depend totally on who was in town, who they were working with, who they wanted to discuss something with. Because we usually had somebody around there. But they touched so many people's lives, all kinds of people.

Scobie: How did they handle the need to be alone together, during the day?

Pick: They simply went off by themselves, but their house wasn't that hectic. As I say, they had their own suites if they wanted to get away from everybody, away from the kids, away from noise outside if there was any. Up in the hills, you don't get much. But I don't think they really are that kind. I think late evening for many people is their best time to be together and this was true for Helen and Mel. And the rest of the time they both loved people.

Scobie: And you often had people at dinnertime?

Pick: Often.

Scobie: But more friends than anything formal.

Pick: That's right. They would never invite--or rarely--business contacts. For instance, I don't think Harry Cohn, who was head of Columbia Studios and to whom Melvyn was under contract, was ever invited. That was a relationship Melvyn had at the studio. Cohn was a character. He used to throw his head out the window and use profanity at Mel--he was a very profane man. Or Louis B. Mayer. He was never, that I recall, invited to the house, and that was Mel's other head of studio at MGM. They simply didn't want these elements interfering with their lives. This you could take care of with your agent or simply meeting with them on a businesslike basis.

Scobie: Was that Mel's idea?

Pick: It was just a natural way to go. You know, you don't have to entertain them. There's nothing that says because you're under contract to somebody that you have to wine and dine them.

Scobie: What about Helen's contacts in the Democratic party?

Pick: Anybody that they liked they'd bring in.

Scobie: Did Helen and Mel ever get away for weekends or vacations?

Pick: Yes, they went up to Carmel after they built a house up there. They went to Europe together. They went to the White House together, as I told you. They would go to Palm Springs. Sometimes they'd take somebody with them. Often I'd go with them. And they'd go up to San Francisco. Of course, Helen adored San Francisco, absolutely adored it.

Scobie: The house in Carmel was built as a weekend home?

Pick: As a weekend home. Mostly we'd drive up there. A lot of times we'd fly if we didn't have much time. It was a small house, and it was backed up on the Mission. Now I've seen it since then, and the Mission grounds that used to be nothing but grounds are now loaded with small homes. You looked out at Point Lobos, over here in one direction, and then down to Pebble Beach this way. It was on a hill. So charming.

Scobie: Did you get paid for what you did, or just your expenses?

Pick: I got paid, and very well. And of course I had no further obligations, such as room and board. And I ate like a king.

Scobie: And you didn't have any household tasks because of servants.

Pick: No, no. Though I would gladly have pitched in. We were "family."

Scobie: Well, now when did they sell the Outpost?

Pick: I'm not too clear about that, but it was after the war. Because Melvyn was still away.

Scobie: Still in the service?

Pick: Still in the service, as I recall.

Scobie: And she did that on her own?

Pick: I'm sure she did, and I'm sure this was partially motivated by not being able to get household help, and such. And then she lived in Washington more than she lived in California. So that was probably why they sold it.

Scobie: Sure. It didn't make sense to keep it.

Pick: No.

Scobie: When did they get their Riverside Drive apartment in New York?

Pick: That was the next move after she left Washington.

Scobie: What did they do in between? Use the Carmel house?

Pick: I don't know what they did in between, but I imagine soon after Helen was defeated by Nixon, they started looking for an apartment in New York.

Scobie: So basically they've had two major homes, the Outpost and Riverside Drive.

Pick: Right. And Vermont.

Scobie: And Vermont. Absolutely!

Pick: Helen could fill a book about Vermont, she loves it so.

Scobie: Was Carmel a meaningful spot for them?

Pick: It was. They didn't use it terribly often, however, because both Helen and Melvyn were very busy, and they'd let their friends have it when they couldn't use it. I used to go up there for a change. And that was equally as charming in a miniaturized way as any of the other houses they've ever had.

It was a small house. Three bedrooms, a bunkroom off the kitchen where you could put the kids, you know. And of course the other rooms that go to make a house a home!

Early Political Contacts

Scobie: Tell me, how did they first get involved with politics?

Pick: Well, they had a friend, Remsen [spells out] Bird, who was president of Occidental College, and his wife was Helen. They had many interesting conversations over the years. They'd go down to the symphony

Pick: and go to the Hollywood Bowl, the theater, et cetera. That's the kind of life they led then, a lot to do with music. And then they had many other friends, different friends. They had one, Dr. Gabriel Segall [spells out] who was very intelligent, very knowledgeable. There was a lot of intellectual conversation at their parties, you know, and things like that, and they were concerned for the very real problems that we had.

Scobie: What kinds of things were talked about?

Pick: Well, everything, from music to art, literature to science. Gabriel Segall was a great friend of [Albert] Einstein's. And of course, Remsen Bird, with his intellectual background would bring fascinating people up to the house, you know, and he started, in a very clever and subtle way, getting Helen and Mel, and incidentally me, involved in what he thought we should be doing. And this was the caliber of mind that they surrounded themselves with. In addition to that, they had a group of motion picture people, like Herbert Marshall and his wife, and the Edward G. Robinsons, and others.

Once, Frances Perkins, our then Secretary of Labor, came out here, and whether this was connected with Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt or not I'm not sure. Helen knew Mrs. Roosevelt from when she came out here to study the Okies' situation, the migratory workers. Helen took Mrs. Roosevelt on a tour, and she stayed with Helen. I don't think that trip was planned through Remsen Bird. One of the big events was when Frances Perkins came out and Helen and Mel gave her a reception and a dinner. And Remsen Bird made out the guest list, and he had Walt Disney, he had Donald Douglas, he had the top executives of many of the top California corporations, and their wives, on that list.

Now, here is Helen, beginning to be deeply involved in Democratic party policy. Several guests had been invited for an after dinner reception to meet Miss Perkins. And, as was inevitable, many of them arrived while we were still at dinner. I simply excused myself from the dinner table and was at the front door to greet each one of them and try to remember their names so that I could introduce them to Helen, Mel, and Miss Perkins. Because, should I pull a faux pas at this state I'd be in the soup, you know. I had had the dining room doors closed so that neither of the two groups would be disturbed. Then, as soon as Helen and Mel could manage it gracefully, they left the dinner table to join the guests there for the reception. Luckily, I remembered their names.

Scobie: You mean you were having dinner, and others were coming afterwards for a reception?

Pick: Yes.

Scobie: And who was at the dinner party?

Pick: There were certain people that Remsen Bird thought would be a very "right group" for dinner.

Scobie: For Perkins?

Pick: Right. It wasn't for Donald Douglas, or Walt Disney!

Scobie: Do you remember who those were?

Pick: Truthfully, I don't. I've forgotten. Well, the reception guests have arrived in their minks and jewels, "Coming to meet Mme. Perkins," you know, and in the "stars' home." It was really a scene! Well, that was Remsen.

It turned out to be an extremely successful evening. And later Miss Perkins spoke and then she said, "Now, have you any questions?" The questions came up, and Miss Perkins, who had a fabulous memory for names would say, "Yes, Mr. Douglas. Now, regarding this point, I'm glad you brought that up." She was wonderful, it was an exciting, exciting evening, and it was the beginning of Helen and Mel being really tied into the community, the economic community, and Remsen was responsible for all that.

Scobie: Why was Perkins coming to California?

Pick: She was coming out here to investigate some problems connected with labor.

Scobie: And Remsen Bird knew her?

Pick: No, I think somebody who Helen had met said, "You two have got to get together, so that's how that was done. But once Bird knew that she was coming out, then he thought, "Aha..."

Scobie: "I'm going to move in."

Pick: Yes. I think he's dead now, but he was very, very clever in doing this type of thing. Because here we were, getting the liberal Democrats along with the conservative Republicans, and the two entirely different sides of the economic community, all in one room, and in a great atmosphere, and he knew that it had to work.

Scobie: And it did.

Pick: It did. Then when Mrs. Roosevelt was out here, that was when I first got here. I had known her years before. When I was at college, I worked in the WPA [Works Progress Administration] Arts Project.

Scobie: And you knew her personally?

Pick: Yes, but not well.

Scobie: How did you know her?

Pick: Because she used to come over to the art project in the [Department of] Treasury and talk with us, and so on and so forth. So I had met her. And then when she came out here with her secretary, Miss Malvina Thompson, and stayed at the house, of course I got to know her much better. Such a lovely and legendary lady! And then that's when they made the trip up into the Okie camps.

Scobie: Now, was that when Helen invited her to come out and see the migrant camps?

Pick: No, she was on a speaking tour, but she always had a reason to be out here.

Scobie: Who got the two together?

Pick: Well, I think by this time, Helen knew her. Yes, she knew her. She had some people in Washington she had visited and so on and so forth. Oh, I guess it may have happened through the John Steinbeck Association with the head of the agricultural department, or one of the heads-- Cason Calloway, I think his name was. I think he was really the one that brought them together because he was a friend of Mrs. Roosevelt.

Scobie: One article I read said that Aubrey Williams was involved here.

Pick: That's who I'm trying to think of, yes! He was the contact with Helen doing something about the Okies. Because he was connected, I think, with the Department of Agriculture.

Scobie: The National Youth Administration.

Pick: Ah-hah. That was the contact. He arranged for everything, for them to meet the Roosevelts and the whole thing.

There's a very cute story about when Helen and Mel went East to stay at the White House.

Scobie: This is marvellous!

Pick: All right. They went to stay at the White House. And this was Mrs. Roosevelt's way of getting them involved, too. And Mel, and the other gentlemen who were invited for dinner, and the president had cocktails. The men went into the dining room, and then the ladies followed. And the president was seated with Helen on his left. She was so thrilled, and she had such a lovely time with him. One thing really impressed her. She said, "Walter, I got quite a shock when I saw them move him away from the table. This man was so vital and alive." She hadn't realized that he was in a--more or less--wheelchair.

Well, the amusing part of this evening was they went to bed that night, and I think Melvyn was in the Lincoln room, and Helen was in the other room, with a bath separating the two. Or Helen was in the Lincoln Room. And she said to Melvyn, "Melvyn, I'm lonesome. [Laughs] This room is big, and this bed is big." So the long and short of it is, Melvyn went into Helen's bedroom. The next morning--of course--Mel hadn't slept in his bed. So he went in and rumbled up the bed so the maid wouldn't think that they couldn't stay away from each other at least in the White House. [Laughs] This is not typical of either one of them. They never think of things like that. But the date when this happened and other of these stories, I have really forgotten.

Scobie: Yes, that can be pinpointed later. Do you remember who was the person that actually got Helen involved in Democratic politics?

Pick: Well, I think it was Aubrey Williams, who was the friend of Mrs. Roosevelt, who really got them together. He was very important in his agency. And she got to know William O. Douglas during this period, and she got to know the Ickes, Harold Ickes, and this thing all developed sort of naturally.

Scobie: Where did she meet them?

Pick: Through her contacts in Washington and through these people in the administration who said they thought that the Douglasses should be involved in what was happening since they were such interesting and talented people. Of course, Melvyn always was involved, going back to Eugene V. Debs, in Chicago. So he goes way back. Helen would probably not have been exposed to politics except for the roots of Melvyn's deep concern.

Scobie: What all led up to Helen's being an alternate delegate to the 1940 Democratic convention.

Pick: Oh, I wasn't there. They took the train to wherever the convention was, I remember that. And that was an Olson delegation.

Scobie: Right. And you weren't involved in that?

Pick: No. I remember her previous committeewoman, who was a former and frustrated actress. I'm trying to think of her name. She was from a prominent California family--with a Spanish name.* I hadn't thought of her since--the train just brought that up--but no, I wasn't on that trip.

Scobie: Let's see, Mel was a delegate, and she was an alternate delegate.

Pick: That's right.

Scobie: And out of that came the nomination to be national committeewoman in 1940. There's some talk that her influence with the Roosevelts had something to do with it, but I don't know.

Pick: I'm sure that Mrs. Roosevelt would have been happy to have Helen grow in politics and they must have had influence, and Olson did control that delegation. It was his, I believe. I don't know how much the Roosevelts controlled the California delegation. Who were some of the bigwigs in California politics? Other than Olson, I can't think offhand. But by this time, Helen knew Mrs. Roosevelt well, you see. And she was doing everything possible to have Helen meet the right people, to keep her supplied with information, and to introduce her to the Harold Ickes, and to do all this to stimulate her interest. That way they did affect her, but I don't think they had much control over any delegation from here.

Scobie: But perhaps over appointment as national committeewoman.

Pick: Well, the national committee would have some effect there, and of course, James Farley, I guess, was the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. But Helen wasn't exactly a Farley favorite, you know. Neither was she a Kennedy favorite.

Helen Gahagan Douglas and Her Children in Their Early Years

Scobie: Now you came out in 1937. Then Mary Helen was born in 1938. Do you remember this?

Pick: I certainly do.

*She was Lucretia del Valle Grady (Mrs. Henry), Democratic National Committeewoman for California, 1932-1940.

Scobie: Tell me about what went on.

Pick: It was one of these scheduled things, very organized. Helen was going to have the baby at a certain time. We then lived over on South Hudson. Helen, Melvyn, Evelyn Chavoor, who was Peter's nurse then (she later became Helen's administrative assistant) and myself. We all headed for Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena. On the way was Remsen Bird's Occidental College. We stopped in there and Helen says, "I just wanted to say hello to you. I'm going to the hospital to have our baby." [Laughs]

Scobie: She actually went in?

Pick: Yes! So then we went into the hospital. Helen had this beautiful velvet dressing gown on, with mink tails and things, you know, and of course she had been voted one of the ten best-dressed women in America. I heard a woman remark in one of the wards, "My God! Who can that be with all that entourage? It must be royalty or something." [Laughs] And these were just her close friends!

And then later on, the Remsen Birds came over to the hospital. Well, I thought at one point, not having gone through this experience myself, that it must be over by now. And all of a sudden, here comes Helen walking down the hall and she hadn't had the baby yet! And she talked with us and said, "Be a little while!" So there was a lot of humor and love in everything that happened in that household.

Then Mary Helen was born, and I saw little Mary Helen carried out of the delivery room and I knew that this was going to be a beautiful girl. She just had to be! And you know, all babies are not beautiful. And she had lovely long hands and this lovely hair and everything. And this was the first baby I'd ever seen that had just been born. They had hardly washed her. Well, that's what that was, when Mary Helen was born.

There's one other funny instance, I'm trying to recall. The Douglasses had built a house up in Carmel, and we were staying there. And Helen, who was then Democratic National Committeewoman for California, had to go over to Sacramento for a big thing that was happening there. It was to be the first time she would meet the committeewomen of different counties, you see. And I drove over with her.

We arrive at the hotel at about two o'clock in the morning, and there's not a room to be had! Finally, the owner of this chain of hotels, who was staying there, hears that there's not a room for her, so he gives up his so-called "suite"--a sitting room and a bedroom with a bath. And we were so tired, and I said, "Helen, I've got to

Pick: get to bed. I'll get up at six and go on down and get my coffee. The ladies were going to be there at seven-thirty. And I slept on the couch in the living room.

So I get up, get dressed, and sneak out the door. I had the outside key to her bedroom to come back in, because I'm not supposed to be around because "she has been an actress," and "who is this young man who is here," you know all that rot! [Laughs]

Well, that's fine, so I'm back in the bedroom working on a speech, a revision we were going to make. Well, Helen forgets that we've made an arrangement for me to stay quietly in the bedroom, and she calls out, "Oh, Walter..." and then she realizes what she's done. So I've got to come out. So I make my entrance from the bedroom, and she introduces me to each of these ladies as, "This is my cousin, Walter Pick," the accent on cousin.

Now here is a person who's been a star in the theater, who pays no attention to these things normally. And I was in stitches inside of me, and I thought, "I can't believe what I'm hearing[laughs], because this is not like her." So that was one of my experiences with the first meeting with these county committeewomen. They were all so pleasant.

Scobie: I would like to talk about Helen and her feelings towards the kids, and the kind of time she spent with them.

Pick: She would let nothing interfere with anything with those children--her career, politics, or anything--if her children needed her to be at home.

Scobie: Let's talk specifically, at around the period when you first came out. Peter would have been four. Just thinking back to a typical kind of day, what would she do with the kids?

Pick: Well, it depends. They always had a nurse.

Scobie: And that was Evie?

Pick: No, it would be other people. You see, Evie was going to UCLA when we lived on South Hudson. Her father was a Syrian, and he had this greengrocer's truck, and that's where Helen's help bought all the produce, the vegetables. Evie, however, was never a trained nurse or household servant in any way. But I guess she needed some money or whatever, and so at some point she began taking care of Peter and then of Mary Helen. We all love Evie dearly.

Scobie: What kinds of things would she do with the kids? Did she bathe them, get them up in the morning?

Pick: All the things that a nursemaid would do.

Scobie: Did Helen change diapers?

Pick: Oh, yes. Whenever she could. Oh, yes. And speaking about changing diapers, I meant to tell you about this earlier--when Mary Helen was a baby, and they were up at the Outpost, and Helen had to go off to some kind of an appointment. It was a Thursday which was the day the help were all gone. Everybody. They let everybody go on the same day. Well, this leaves me alone with Mary Helen out on the patio, and she's in one of these screened-in cribs. Now, going from the patio into the house, there were two rather narrow screen doors. The office was down where the garage was. Helen says, "Now all you have to do is just look in to see if she's okay."

I did once. I never saw anything like it in all my born days. It was a mess! I thought, what am I to do? I can't leave her like that. So here I am. I finally pick her up and hold her as far away from me as possible, but when I come to those damn screen doors I think, how the hell am I going to open them without holding her a little closer? [Laughs]

So I finally get her into the bathroom and to the tub, and never having had an experience like this, I'm afraid I'm going to drown her, because she keeps slipping in the tub. I have to dash over here to get a towel or over there to get a washrag, and each time she slips a bit further. [Laughs] Well, I finally made it, but later I said, "Helen, you never again leave me with her, alone." And I've reminded Mary Helen of this in the years past, when she'd been a lovely young lady. I said, "That was absolutely the most frightening experience." But don't misunderstand, Helen wasn't careless in leaving me with her. She simply had an important appointment and there I was, Walter, whom she trusted. I loved her for this!

Scobie: Did Helen nurse her, do you remember?

Pick: I think she did.

Scobie: Did she feed her?

Pick: Oh, yes. There were whole days when she was alone with the children.

Scobie: Did she take them places or read them stories? Do you remember what kind of time she spent with them?

Pick: Oh, she made life exciting for them.

Scobie: How?

Pick: In many ways. Of course, we didn't have Disneyland then. I don't ever remember her doing those kinds of things. But at home, whatever made it interesting for them, she provided for them. Now, she could easily have spoiled them, too. Neither one of them I ever remember being disciplined, and Peter could be difficult. He had all the temperament and everything, of the two of them. And I spanked him a couple of times, because Helen couldn't. Neither could Mel. Then they'd break down. They'd just weep. And any child needs it occasionally, girls as well as boys. And I didn't like having to do it, but nobody else was doing it. But they weren't bad children at all. Quite the contrary. They weren't remotely like children from some professional families we knew, who could be monsters.

Scobie: Did they send them to nursery school?

Pick: Yes, they did, and you know what the nursery school became?

Scobie: What?

Pick: The Buckley Schools.

Scobie: Is that right?

Pick: This big, big, gigantic school, which is one of the finest in the country. Isabelle Buckley and her husband were friends of Helen's and Mel's. He was a World War I ace, and she had come from a very fine family and had a marvelous education, and I guess they got to the point where some extra income would be welcome. They lived over on Doheney, right near Sunset Boulevard, and they turned their house into a day school. And Peter went there. Later on, Mary Helen went there. Little Manny Robinson went there. And she built up quite a clientele. She's still active today, Isabelle Buckley, and today this beautiful school is enormous and she's built it from that. That was the day school that they went to.

Scobie: This was just pre-school?

Pick: Pre-school. Then, I remember they went to Chappin's for primary. I guess they both did.

Scobie: Did they go to pre-school all day long, or just in the mornings?

Pick: I think they had to be picked up around twelve or one o'clock--something like that.

Scobie: How did Mel interact with the kids?

Pick: As a father, who was a very busy motion picture star, he loved them dearly. But I don't think he was very paternal. It was from Helen they got most of the affection. Love they received from both parents.

Scobie: Was she a warm and affectionate person with the children?

Pick: Oh yes, as she is with everybody. The way she is with everybody. This is a recent example. When I called her before Christmas [1977] --did I tell you this?

Scobie: I don't remember. I don't think so.

Pick: Because I'd heard she'd been in the hospital. And Evie was there, up from Washington. It was about ten-thirty their time. And Evie said, "Oh Walter, Helen will be on the phone. Just a minute." Helen got on the phone and she sounded absolutely fabulous. And remember, this was a sticky time for her! She says, "I'm having a party for forty-six people tomorrow night. There are just going to be old friends." And here I'd been so concerned about her, as everybody else was. Making me feel good, is what she was doing. Just to hear her voice and feel her strength made me feel that things weren't as bad as they could be.

But that was Helen, the way she was with servants, with her family and friends. I never heard an argument between Helen and Melvyn--a serious argument. Now, they might argue about the value of Christmas, when Melvyn would take the point of view, "Why don't you do it another time during the year? Why do you have to wait for Christmas for all this folderol?" And of course he was Jewish. And Helen says, "But I like it. Everybody has such a happy time." The last time I came to dinner they had an argument about that. [Laughs] But they only argued about superficial things like that, you know. No drama!

Scobie: Now, Mel was half-Jewish, is that right?

Pick: Half-Jewish. His mother was a Christian. His father was Jewish.

Scobie: Was he reared a Jew?

Pick: No, they were not Orthodox.

Scobie: So they didn't celebrate the Jewish holidays.

Pick: No, never. However, I did go to a seder at Dr. Segall's with Helen and Mel one night.

Scobie: But neither child had a Bar Mitzvah or a Bas Mitzvah?

Pick: No, never.

Scobie: Did Mel feel Jewish at all?

Pick: Well, I remember in the early years, when Helen and Mel became more and more involved with the important issues of our times, they belonged to the Anti-Nazi League. Once Melvyn went to the Philharmonic Auditorium to make a speech. Now, Melvyn's original name was Hesselberg, but for years he'd been known professionally as Melvyn Douglas. This audience happened to be predominantly Jewish. And Melvyn starts out his speech with, "I am a Jew."

"Ooohh!" [inhales sharply] through the Jewish audience. Then profound pause! As though it was a crime that he, Melvyn Douglas, would make such a statement. That really gave me quite a jolt. Because I didn't expect them to react that way. I thought they'd be so proud, that this successful man was part Jewish.

There have been many things like that in their lives that have made a deep impact. And then I remember when Mrs. Roosevelt was out here staying with us at the Outpost and she made a speech down at the Philharmonic Auditorium. We didn't know anything about it, but she'd received a threat on her life. They were going to kill her that night. And we went down to the Philharmonic, got out of the car.

We noticed a little Model T Ford was following us all over the place. And it had been parked down below the house. You had to go up a driveway to get to their house. Finally, after the speech, and on the way back home, Miss Thompson said something about it. She said, "Well, we went through that one." You know, in other words, "We got through this alive." [Laughs] And finally Mrs. Roosevelt told the Secret Service people to get away from Helen and Mel's house, that she was staying at a private residence, and she did not want them disturbing their home. Because the Service camped out down there below the house.

She was staying with Helen and Mel in the Outpost Estates house. And that house was later bought by Paul Douglas the actor, which is strange.

Scobie: Is that right?

Pick: Right. And then he died in the house. Then I think Maureen O'Hara rented it for a while. That was one of the loveliest houses I've ever seen. Every time I go up in that area along Mulholland, which is the back of the lot, way up, I look down, and I can see the pool and the patio, and the house is very well kept up. [Pauses]

Pick: There was this big hill behind the house and one time Helen says, "I want that to look pretty in the springtime." So the gardener scattered wildflower seeds by the peck. The rains came. We thought, "Fine, that will germinate the seeds." [Laughs] It didn't germinate them, it washed them all down the hill. What the rains didn't get, the birds did! So we never had anything up there, except the natural growth.

Scobie: So you never had any flowers.

Pick: Never had the wildflowers. In the gardens--cultivated flowers by the ton.

Involvement with the Douglasses' Professional Lives

Scobie: How did Helen get involved in the Anti-Nazi League?

Pick: Because of Melvyn. And then she was involved in the Committee to Aid the destroyer exchange with England [Lend Lease] and all that kind of thing. She was all for that.

Scobie: Do you recall any more details about the various activities such as the Anti-Nazi League that they were involved in together or Helen on her own?

Pick: Well, certainly there is, as the John Steinbeck Committee. And I was deeply involved in that. The group had read John Steinbeck's book, and then we made the trips, without being too well organized about it to the various Okie camps. We were shocked at what we saw. Then it was a matter of trying to get legislation to help them; but in the meantime, they--the Okies--had emergencies to be met.

It started out with the Christmas party thing, where we got contributions from Kern County. Helen was never this kind of a scavenger--one to go out and promote contributions for projects, you know. We got two sides of beef for them, and from the toy manufacturers we got toys for the kids. And Mr. and Mrs. Edward G. Robinson were very active in that, and so were a lot of other people.

I guess Helen was chairman of the John Steinbeck Committee. I remember when a resolution came up where you knew who was a Communist by whichever way they voted on it. I've forgotten what it was about. At the moment when the resolution was presented to the committee, we knew that there were several left-wing people,

Pick: or Communists, in the John Steinbeck Committee. And I believe when Helen realized she couldn't change the picture of that, she then resigned. But she did belong to a committee that had Communists. Well, Communists were everywhere in those days, in a lot of committees. [Laughs] Probably even working with Nixon.

Scobie: Did you go with her to those committee meetings?

Pick: Yes, I did. I attended many of them. And there were some of the people there of whom we were very suspicious, and until this resolution thing was introduced, nobody could be tagged, and you didn't want to make accusations.

Scobie: What was the topic of the resolution?

Pick: Was it the Russo-German pact? I don't remember what the specific issue was, but I do remember that it just nailed it on the head, as to who was who.

Scobie: Had she suspected this ahead of time?

Pick: I think she had a feeling, but Helen and Mel never ran scared. She's very objective, and always her idea is: how do we get this done? This is the thing we want accomplished--who do we have to work with? What can we expect from people? She's very fundamental. Even though she's very sophisticated, she's a very fundamental person, and that's what's never complicated her life, and it's kept it from being complicated. Because she could go right down to the issue, and then she sees. These other things, frills, they are unimportant. I think [laughs] she was just as sure of Melvyn that way when she married him.

Scobie: What about the Fight for Freedom Committee? She wasn't on it until later, was she?

Pick: That was later, and I've forgotten what that was all about.

Scobie: And the William Allen White Committee?

Pick: She was very active in that.

Scobie: I want to get more to what you yourself did when you worked with them. You went with them in 1937. When did you leave them?

Pick: When I was inducted into the army in 1941. I was in New York when Pearl Harbor happened. I'd been in the army about six months. I'd been sent up to Fort Lewis, Washington. Then I was at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. I was with [General George S.] Patton. Twice. And

Pick: General Patton was a close friend of my father's, and I didn't like that very much. [Laughs] Because he would naturally be rough on me.

Scobie: Did you ever marry?

Pick: No. As I said earlier, I had a jilted romance--so I stayed with them all the time, and they spoiled me outrageously. [Laughs]

Scobie: Did you work with them full-time?

Pick: Yes, I did. One morning I might go to the studio with Mel. Usually, I answered most of their correspondence, without their even dictating anything. Because I knew how they would say things. And they hated that dull business, sitting down with a bunch of mail and going through it. They'd say, "yes, no, yes, no," to me on letters and that was it, you know. I'd take it from there. Of course, any letters that demanded personal attention they answered themselves.

Scobie: What kind of mail did Helen and Mel get at the time?

Pick: Of course, Melvyn's was predominantly fan mail. And remember Melvyn, too, got involved in the Department of Social Welfare, when Governor [Culbert] Olson was governor of California. So he was really into political matters before Helen was. So he began to get correspondence relating to social welfare problems. And Helen's correspondence was from people with whom she'd been active in politics, the theater, and music, and various other aspects of her career.

Scobie: Now in 1939 Helen was a member of the National Advisory Committee of the WPA.

Pick: Yes, I remember that. All that was done when she went to Washington to the meetings, and I had very little to do with that.

Scobie: Okay. What about the State Advisory Committee of the National Youth Authority?

Pick: She was on that, I can remember, but again, it hardly involved their home at all. She would go to board meetings and this type of thing.

Scobie: So you did not handle correspondence concerned with these activities of Helen?

Pick: I had very little to do with them. I managed the house, and attendant matters. When we had parties--you know, it was all I could do, to involve the two lives, there. I even had to meet with

Pick: Sam Goldwyn. One time he came up for lunch with Helen, and she got an emergency call and had to leave. So she left me there stranded with Goldwyn! [Laughs]

They were to discuss something of interest and importance to both of them. I've forgotten what it was. But I'll never forget his remark--and this is why I believe everything that you hear about him--when he left, he said, "Oh, Mr. Pick, let me shake my hand." [Laughs] This was the exciting thing about it. I knew who he was, and I had great respect for him as a brilliant producer and great power and I was exposed to this sort of thing constantly.

I was along that night that Edward G. Robinson finally decided to build his art gallery. He and Mel and I went out to dinner, and after dinner he said to Mel, "Would you stop by this mailbox? I want to mail this. It's my contract for my new gallery." These were charming experiences, little things that don't mean anything to this interview, I'm sure, but it really spoiled me, being involved in all that.

Scobie: Meanwhile, were you trying to get a job in a film?

Pick: Oh, I forgot completely about getting a job in films. I was so involved in their lives and then the army intervened.

Scobie: Did Helen remain important as an actress and singer during these years?

Pick: Yes. She did a revival of The Cat and the Fiddle during the period I was with her. That was quite important.

Scobie: That was here in Los Angeles?

Pick: Here in Los Angeles. When Max Gordon produced it in New York, it was during the Depression years but it still ran for 395 performances. Remarkable! Helen came, and the first time she appeared in it, before I came out here, it ran for eleven months in Los Angeles and fourteen months up in San Francisco. And it was a smash hit. But at that time, she was not involved in anything other than the theater.

Scobie: Then when she went back in '39, did it run for a long time?

Pick: It ran for the Civic Light Opera season that we have here and then in San Francisco.

Scobie: So she was away from home for a brief period of time.

Pick: Right. Of course, their seasons didn't last as long as they do now. Six weeks would be the longest in each place.

I'm going to get a glass of water. How's your coffee?

Scobie: I'm fine, thanks.

Pick: Oh, I want to tell you about another thing, and this was, incidentally, how I met my business associate, George Byron. Helen was contracted, when I first came out here, to do a radio show, for a national sponsor, called "Love for a Day." It was all recorded; those shows always were. And she did, I think, twenty-six weeks of it. And then it went on the air, but it wasn't a great success.

It had singing in it, and Melvyn's brother, George Lamarr, was in the cast. And the announcer on the show was George Byron who had just come out from CBS in New York. He later married Jerome Kern's widow. And he and Harry von Zell started out together in radio. So I walked in the studio the first day of rehearsal, and here was the announcer, and he had two Scottish terriers. And I got to know him, and then I went off to Europe in the army, and then when I came back, we got involved in business together. It was through Helen and that show that I met George.

Scobie: Why was this series not very successful?

Pick: It wasn't that well written. It was called "Love for a Day," and it was a soap opera, with an opportunity for her to sing occasionally.

Scobie: Why did she do it?

Pick: I think just to try something in the medium. And they offered her a very large fee--quite a cut above the average. But then Helen has always been one of the highest paid stars in the theater--from the beginning.

Scobie: Is that right?

Pick: Right. I guess the sponsors and the ad agency thought that would be the lure to her, but it really wasn't. It was trying a new medium that intrigued her. But she was the highest priced star.

Scobie: So, from 1935 to when she got into politics, say 1940, were there a lot of demands for her that she turned down?

Pick: Well, anybody of her importance always has them. Melvyn had them too, scripts and all that kind of thing. And she loved She, the [Sir H.] Rider Haggard book. She did the picture for RKO. But they really botched that up in production and everything. But Helen came off very well, with excellent reviews.

Scobie: What did you think about that film?

Pick: Well, I was a little young, and I was a bit surprised to see a big mock-up of Helen put in front of the RKO theater in Washington, D.C.! And that filmy dress, with the wind blowing on it, you know. That I was a little bit sensitive to. And I have never liked Haggard or Jules Verne. I'm not one of the space types, and that was really a space-type story in those days. But Helen's fascinated by that. Anything that's a new idea, she'll pick up.

Scobie: Oh?

Pick: Oh, space, the whole thing.

Scobie: Why didn't she do any more movies?

Pick: Well, she probably didn't like the scripts they gave her. And then she went back to Broadway to do some plays.

Scobie: Do you think it had anything to do with the fact that Mel was already established?

Pick: I don't think so. No, no.

Scobie: There was never any sense of competition?

Pick: Never. They'll tell each other if they're good or bad, but that's about it.

Scobie: Why do you think that was?

Pick: Because number one, he wasn't competing with her. If it was another woman, then that's something else, you know. The fact that he might have gotten more offers and films than she never occurred to her. She was so happy for him.

This reminds me of an amusing incident. One time Melvyn was asked: "You've done a lot of pictures with many prominent female stars. Who's your favorite actress? And he said, "The three Gs." So naturally, the question was, "Who are the three Gs?" He said, "Gahagan, Garland, and Garbo." I think that's kind of nice. That shows Melvyn's type of humor. What was the other one? It won't come back to me. That's not an important anecdote, but it's part of the character, you know.

Scobie: You know, today when you take two young people in a marriage that are in the same career field, it is difficult. What do you think the difference was for the Douglasses?

Pick: Maturity, from the fact that they both grew up in the theater, and they were prepared when the big success came. That's the trouble with these young people today with television and all this sudden exposure. Boom! like that you're up there, and you're not ready. And that has happened to so many--basic talent, but not sufficiently developed to accept the challenge of an extremely demanding career! But Helen and Mel were prepared for all that. They knew every facet of their craft.

Scobie: How would you evaluate her as an actress?

Pick: Well, first of all, I think nobody can play every part. In a dramatic, glamorous part, she was exciting. As a matter of fact, they ran her film She out here not too long ago, and there was a rave review. The critics and public had forgotten how good she was. They criticized some of the actual picture, but they remarked about how fine she was. And she was fabulous on stage in Tonight or Never because, of course, there was that rapport between Mel and Helen. That was the beginning of their romance. They were married during the run of this play. And it just sparked, you know, on stage.

Scobie: You could see it. So Helen was keeping herself busy obviously.

Pick: Yes, that's right, but she wasn't too involved. She was doing the concerts, and then later on they became lecture tours when she became more important in public life. And then she and Melvyn did a reading out at Remsen Bird's college, Occidental. They did several things from Shakespeare. So there was always something going on.

As An Aide in Helen Gahagan Douglas's Congressional Office, 1946-1948

Scobie: Let's pick up--now, you went into the war in 1941. And then when did you come out?

Pick: I came out in '45. I was in the army for four years.

Scobie: Did you write to Helen and Mel during this period?

Pick: Probably Evie wrote [laughs] the answers as I had done for them and for other people! But occasionally Helen would send me a long-hand note.

Scobie: And do you still have those?

Pick: I think I do. Let me research that and see what I have.

Scobie: Good.

Pick: How long are you going to be around in this area?

Scobie: I'm leaving tomorrow, but I can call you. Do you want to look tonight?

Pick: Well, the house is in such a mess. I know where Mrs. Roosevelt's papers are, but then I know there's a whole batch of Helen's correspondence with me.

Scobie: Well, if you find it before I leave, I can come pick it up. Otherwise we can discuss another way to get together on this.

Pick: And probably in the meantime I'll want to make photostats of it for my own.

Scobie: Okay, good. Well, we'll keep in touch about that. Okay, so you came out of the army in 1945, and then what happened?

Pick: Well, I landed in Boston, and I called New York to say hello to Helen, Mel, and the family, all very emotional, and they said, "As soon as you get out, you must come down and be with us." Well, I went home to Washington first to see my mother, and I worked for Helen. Later I went back to New York. And then I lived in New York for quite a long while where, with a partner, I formed a company for the production of industrial shows. We had a unique idea and it was quite successful. And then I came out here. So they had asked me up to Vermont dozens of times, but I haven't done it yet, and I think I probably should this summer.

Scobie: You've never been to Vermont?

Pick: Oh yes. Many times, but not while Helen and Mel have been the Gahagan family in residence. When my aunt was alive, I was there, but I haven't been there since Helen's fixed the place up and done so many things to it. What else would you like to know?

Scobie: So in '45, weren't you with her congressional office?

Pick: Oh, yes. I broke my leg while I was in Washington, but I had started working with her before this happened. And Evie was the administrative assistant there in the office, and she was--as she is now--extremely capable. I know one of the other things I wanted to tell you about. A girl by the name of Terry.

Scobie: Juanita?

Pick: Juanita Terry. Lovely girl. And then there was extra help that would come in and out. Well, Evie, Juanita and I worked very well together, and we'd go out to lunch together in the cafeteria and things like that. We'd sit together and occasionally, some of these southern congressmen would come by and--because Juanita was a black girl--they'd look at us as though we were dirt.

Scobie: Was she permitted to eat in the cafeteria?

Pick: Yes. Oh, yes.

Scobie: I had understood that the only place she could eat was the Supreme Court cafeteria.

Pick: Well, she ate in the cafeteria with us. I remember it.

Scobie: I don't know where I ran across that.

Pick: So we had--again--a wonderful relationship there, and even the people who came in temporarily to help out.

Scobie: Well, now when did you join her office staff? Right when you came out of the service?

Pick: Soon after that. Because Helen was in Washington.

Scobie: She went to Washington in '44.

Pick: So this would be probably the beginning of her second term.

Scobie: Nineteen forty-six, '47.

Pick: Somewhere in there.

Scobie: And you were in Washington how long? Until her election in 1948?

Pick: No, I went back to New York, and then I came out here to California and started this other business, the industrial show production, Byron/Pick Associates.

Office Responsibilities

Scobie: I ran across an article which was written in 1949, and it said you had been with the office about a year and a half. So that would jibe.

Pick: Yes.

Scobie: So you probably came in sometime in the middle of '46.

Pick: Right.

Scobie: And you were there how long? About a year and a half, two years?

Pick: A year and a half, two years. I've forgotten all that.

Scobie: Okay, what did you do?

Pick: Well, it was the same thing as anyone does in a congressional office. You answer mail, you arrange interviews, you see people if the congressman isn't there, you know, because they can't always take the time to see everybody. We handled a lot of passport problems, with the passport agency there.

And I've got a problem now [laughs], and I wish I was in Congress because here I was fine for four years to go overseas in the army without a passport, but now they can't find my birth certificate. I was born on an army post and they have the records, but I can't get a passport, and I want to go to Europe.

And we handled a lot of personal things--even some people wanted seeds from the agricultural department. Not many from the congressional district that Helen came from--the fourteenth. But a lot of personal problems; and then they would come and visit, and you would arrange for them to get into certain places--public relations work.

Scobie: Let me read you something about yourself. I bet you didn't even know this was written.

Pick: Here I get a shock.

Scobie: Oh, don't panic. This is an article from Fortnight. Do you remember Fortnight?

Pick: No.

Scobie: It was a bi-weekly news magazine that started in the forties. This was written in January 1949, and it's about Helen, mainly about her district, and is a straightforward political analysis of her.

Here is the paragraph I wanted to read to you. "It would be difficult to find two more devoted helpers than Helen's two other assistants [Pick and Terry]. One is Walter Pick, who before Helen got into politics, was Helen Gahagan Douglas's secretary for six years. He was in the army, where he served four years on duty on

Scobie: every European and African front as a Signal Corps elected man, when Helen was first elected. He returned to his civilian role only a year and a half ago. Quiet, handsome..."

Pick: Oh!

Scobie: "...sharp profile and wavy blond hair [Pick laughs] and efficient, Pick is the detail man. He is Helen's cousin." And then it goes on to talk about Evie. Would you like to comment on the nature of your feelings towards Helen?

Pick: It was almost a religion working with Helen and Mel. It really was. They changed my entire life. I told you my mother was a Republican, and Helen's mother was a Republican. My father was an army officer. If he could have been anything, he would have been a Republican. Conservative as can be. Prejudiced and all that sort of thing. And I would not today have my political beliefs or convictions if I had not been with Helen and Mel, never had lived with them and worked with them. So it was a dedicated thing. It is with Evie.

As we all know, Mrs. Roosevelt inspired countless people in this world, none more profoundly than Helen and Mel. They, in turn bring inspiration to those fortunate enough to be close to, and work with them.

But it isn't a blind thing that you follow, because you'll argue with them if you think they're doing something wrong. I would have to talk Helen and Mel into doing certain things that they didn't want to do.

Scobie: Like what?

Pick: Well, for instance, Melvyn would be out some place, and he'd half-assed committed himself to a project--committed himself to being there. But, he'd come home from the studio, where he'd probably been "shooting" since early morning--so bone tired that he didn't feel up to it. I'd say, "Melvyn, you said you would be there. Be there!" And he would. And Helen sometimes would say, "Walter, can't you get me out [laughs] of this?" I'd say, "No way!" Although we weren't saying "no way" in those days. And there were times when they wished they hadn't committed themselves to a social type of thing.

But anything involving responsibility, making a speech or anything like that, they followed through on. But there would be times when they'd much rather have curled up with a good book. And then it was my job because I knew that this could be something that might color the picture a bit for them--intrigue them. Also, they

- Pick: were both very considerate of others, and conscious of obligations, and they would realize that it could be a big disappointment to the host and hostess, should they not show. Also, you could easily create bad blood by not being on deck when expected.
- Scobie: It says here, "Pick is the detail man." You explained some of this yesterday, but could you elaborate a bit more on what it meant to be the detail man?
- Pick: Well, Helen and Mel didn't like to get bogged down in details.
- Scobie: [Laughs] So, that's exactly what it says!
- Pick: [Laughs] So you picked up the scraps and followed through.
- Scobie: How much of your business was congressional district business of the voters?
- Pick: Well, Helen had a girl out here, you know, who handled her office. And she was very capable. She had been with Tom Ford previously.
- Scobie: Who was the girl?
- Pick: I should remember her name because one time Catherine was out here, we drove down to see her.
- Scobie: It wasn't Ruth Lybeck?
- Pick: No, Ruth was more active than this woman. This woman was really a secretary who ran the office, and as I said, she'd been with Tom Ford.
- Scobie: Well, I can find out who it was. But now, didn't a lot of questions come into Helen's office on congressional complaints and problems and so on?
- Pick: Yes, certainly. Oh, I wanted to tell you about something Helen did. We saw for quite a long while how CBS used the market basket gimmick to demonstrate how prices had gone up. Helen started that. She walked into the House of Representatives with a cart full of food and did a presentation on prices and price controls. There was quite a bit of press on it.
- Scobie: Now, you weren't in her office at that time, were you?
- Pick: I wasn't, no. But I remember that she did that.
- Scobie: What kinds of people in the government came to see Helen? Was she pursued by lobbyists?

Pick: The only lobbyists that I know of were the good ones. [Laughs] They were the United Auto Workers, with Walter Reuther. The name Ziffren--Paul Ziffren and his wife--I know that they were friends, and also--they must have been lobbyists.

Scobie: Ziffren?

Pick: No, he's a lawyer out here. I think the name is Sifton.

Scobie: Sifton, S-i-f-t-o-n?

Pick: I think so. Again, those names haven't crossed my mind for years. At one point, they wanted me to go with Walter Reuther to work with him. But I wasn't too keen on it at the time so I never pursued it.

Scobie: What did you do if other lobbyists wanted to come and try and influence Helen?

Pick: I don't remember any of that because Helen had quite a reputation for being a very independent individual, and also, she was pro-labor. I don't think any of the other boys--the oil lobby or anything like that came by. They left her alone! She was against this oil drilling out here on the coast and against Edwin Pauley. I think he was Democratic National Committeeman when she was Committee-woman. They've got a stadium named after him.

Harry Truman visited him when he came out here. And she'd have no part of that. I think the only one she ever had any contact with--and this was probably through Remsen Bird--was the man who later became a congressman. Bell, Alphonso Bell from Bel Air, who was an oil man. But he was a good oil man! [Laughs] I don't remember any high pressure.

She was very close to the ILGWU [International Ladies' Garment Workers Union] and they contributed to her campaigns. But they were related to the projects she was interested in. She was interested in labor.

Scobie: How did your work differ from Evie's in Washington?

Pick: Well Evie, you see, had been there longer than I had. So she knew a lot more than I did by the time I came in to be with Helen. And Evie was really the head of the office. But there wasn't that feeling of who's head of the office. It's like here [at my real estate office] you know. If there's nobody answering the telephone, you answer the telephone.

Scobie: That's because you're the kind of person you are, you know.

- Pick: Well, there are some people who say, "Why should I do that?" But she was the top person in the office. She was really almost an administrative assistant.
- Scobie: But did things naturally fall that were sort of your responsibility and her responsibility?
- Pick: Well, there were a lot of detail things that I wasn't familiar with that Evie would handle for Helen. And she took shorthand. I didn't.
- Scobie: Could you think back to a typical day, when things would cross your desk? Give an example of what you would do?
- Pick: Well, now of course, when it came to legislation, we didn't have to do anything with that. It was the business of being sure you kept up with the mail, being sure that people got their questions answered as soon as possible, and taking care of people who were in from out of town--that kind of thing, which Helen couldn't spend any time with.
- Scobie: I assume you got a lot of constituency mail.
- Pick: Oh, yes. And a lot of it was from blacks, because you see, her district was in the majority black.
- Scobie: Can you pick out the typical kinds of things that people wrote about?
- Pick: Well, some of them would write that they were so proud of her, what she'd done. Or somebody would have a personal problem.
- Scobie: Like what?
- Pick: Well, as I mentioned earlier, a problem getting a passport. But most of these letters were from people who worked with her out here and watched her here, and wanted to give her some kudos [pronounce it like to-dos], or when she did something they felt was right, which they felt was always right. She didn't have any cranks writing her or things like that.
- Scobie: Did the average citizen write and say, "My brother's in a Veterans Hospital, and I can't..."
- Pick: They did.
- Scobie: Did you have much of that?

Pick: I'm sure we had quite a bit of it. Or they would want things for instance from the Department of Agriculture, or that child care project, you know, that one of the departments puts out, when you have a baby. It tells you all the things you have to do. Important! That was in great demand. You'd get copies of that and mail it out, broadside!

Scobie: So she did that. Way back then that was done?

Pick: Oh, yes.

Helen Douglas's Influence in Congress

Scobie: What kinds of issues concerned her the most during that period?

Pick: Anything that affected human life. It could be the Atomic Energy Commission, it could be anything that would make people's lives worse or better. Because she's an instinctive humanitarian.

Scobie: Well, how did she go about concerning herself with her interest? Did she propose bills?

Pick: Well, see, I wasn't too active in that part of it, because those bills were usually drafted by other people and then brought in for Helen to approve and introduce in the hopper.

Scobie: Did she introduce a number of bills on issues to which she felt committed?

Pick: She introduced quite a few. You see, when you're first in Congress, everybody wants you to do things. And because she was a well-known person and all that, they all wanted her. A friend of hers from Texas warned her, "Now Helen, don't try to do too much. Don't antagonize people by being too determined in anything until you've got your feet wet." I remember that there were several people who cautioned her that way who'd lived in Washington and who made some contacts for her to meet some of these people that later on she became very friendly with.

Scobie: Like who?

Pick: Well, Harry Hopkins was one of them, as I recall, and then, who was the man who was the vice-president who was secretary of agriculture-- [Henry] Wallace, and Justice [William O.] Douglas--who was not Justice Douglas then. I don't think he was. And Harold Ickes. This was the intellectual group in the New Deal that fascinated her.

Scobie: When Roosevelt died, did she lose some of her influence?

Pick: I don't know, because she was nominated for vice president, you know, at the convention that nominated Harry Truman for president. Of course, it was an honorary type of thing, but you knew that--a gesture of confidence and respect.

Scobie: What was behind that, do you know?

Pick: I don't think it was Jimmy Roosevelt! [Laughs] But I think it was just a general feeling that they would like to at least have a woman nominated.

Scobie: Do you remember any more details about the convention?

Pick: I just remember her making that speech, and how excited we all were at three or four o'clock in the morning. The place was practically empty, and it broke my heart. She prepared a beautiful speech, and we knew it was a token thing. That's all I remember, really.

Scobie: There have been comments that I've run across that there was a certain amount of tension and competition between Clare Booth Luce and Helen.

Pick: Oh, there was lots of sparkle there, lots of fireworks.

Scobie: How did it go?

Pick: It wasn't promoted by Helen at all, because Helen wasn't that interested in that kind of sparkle, but I think Clare Booth has always been interested in controversy, publicity, and that sort of thing. Oh, it was cooked up, too. Let's face it. Because Helen was the counterpart of what Luce was with the Republican party, and both being congresswomen and all that sort of thing. It was a natural story, and both being very successful in careers, Clare as a writer--Helen, theater and music. It was a natural thing at the convention from then on to make it an intriguing story. But Helen never sought out things like this. She would never want to get in an argument based on a personality issue. On anything else, yes--anything important. But oh, there was a lot of that, and I remember it so well.

Scobie: Do you think she had much influence in Congress?

Pick: On the Foreign Affairs Committee, definitely.

Scobie: In what way?

- Pick: Well, they respected her, and she knew her subject, and Congress was aware of this. She specialized in foreign affairs. She knew that the Foreign Affairs Committee was important, and I think that's probably the only regret that she has--or the main regret she has--that she ran for the Senate. Because she would have become chairman eventually.
- Scobie: Do you think that she had senatorial ambitions for some time before she ran?
- Pick: I don't think so. I do think that everybody of importance felt that Helen should go to the Senate. That was it. I don't think it was ambition on her part. I really don't. I think it was more or less --maybe bad political advice on somebody's part. Because she would have gotten the seniority in the House, and she could have been much more effective. I, of course, was happy to see her run for the Senate, and I abhorred Nixon, as we all did for so many years. But I didn't realize he had made such inroads out here.
- Scobie: Who did she go to for advice, primarily, in the House, do you recall?
- Pick: I would say any reliable source who had information that she needed. Now, she and [Jacob] Javits got along very well together, you know. They were both on the Foreign Affairs Committee. [Knock on door] She'd seek out the best--this is like her father--pick the best brains, you know, in whatever field you're active in, and if she didn't know how to find the answer, she'd get somebody who did. Always questioning!
- Scobie: Yet any new congressperson needs orientation. Who really came to her side and gave her that orientation?
- Pick: I don't know because I wasn't around then. Evie could tell you all of that. All of that she would know. Well, now there's the gal who's so important--[Esther] Peterson--in the government today. She's not the head of HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] but she's almost as big as that. She was one of Helen's supporters out here and one of her close friends. I didn't know her because this all happened when I was away. I met her during the early stages, and I heard about her as she became more important. She was important in the Johnson administration, too. She was always close to good sources. And then people would become Helen's friends, they'd come to dinner, they would work together.
- Scobie: Did you live at home with her in Washington?
- Pick: No. My mother had a home there, and I lived with her.

Scobie: So you weren't around quite as much as you were in the thirties.

Pick: Oh yes. Helen had a house in Georgetown quite near Mother's home.

Scobie: So you were over there a lot?

Pick: Over there a lot, yes.

Scobie: What was Washington social life like for her? I understand that it was for her, as for so many people, a very different kind of society than other places.

Pick: Well, you see, during the time that Helen was there, and during the Roosevelt period--I sensed this when I went back to Washington once--Washington was just glistening, sparkling, inspiring, with these minds, these ideas, these exciting, creative people. During the time of Nixon--no. Eisenhower--no. Ford--no. Now a little. But it will sparkle once again!

Scobie: Would you compare it to, say, the Kennedy period?

Pick: Well, that was, of course, brilliant too. I mean as far as the...

Scobie: Sparkle.

Pick: Yes.

Scobie: Did the sparkle continue under Truman?

Pick: I don't remember that it did, because they were very quiet people. And of course, with Roosevelt, there were so many exciting people like the secretary of the interior and Frances Perkins, and you knew who the cabinet was. Today, I can name but about three of the cabinet officers, and outside of that horrible attorney general of Mr. Ford's and Mr. Nixon's, I hardly remember anybody else. Henry Kissinger, of course. But in those days in Washington, everybody was intensely aware because they were all in the headlines. And Roosevelt was smart enough to give them identity. So when they asked for something, they could get it.

Scobie: It's been said that Helen was very close to Lyndon Johnson during this time. Do you know anything about that?

Pick: Well, I can remember Lyndon coming to the house a couple of times while I was there, stopping off at the house in Georgetown. Now, Evie lived with them then. She saw him a lot, yes. And he'd come into her office quite a bit. I saw him at the house, but I never saw him at the office. But there, again, Evie knew that.

Scobie: Did legislators stop by her office frequently?

Pick: Not very many of them, because they were always in committee, and they saw each other there, and they saw each other on the House floor. And that was enough. When you were in your office, you were taking care of your own personal affairs.

Scobie: Did she have time for much social life in Washington?

Pick: Well, Helen, in a true sense, doesn't particularly care for social life. I mean, she loves being with her friends, but to fritter away time, trying to impress as being "hostess number one," forget it. She's far too secure for that approach. But to have interesting people there, yes, that was their social life. And they liked to go out to other people's parties. [Laughs] But they always preferred to have everybody come to their home.

Scobie: And did they do a lot of that, then, in Washington?

Pick: Oh yes, and out here, Helen and Mel entertain beautifully.

Another person--oh, this I'll never forget. This was during the inauguration of Harry Truman. Bella Spewak who, with her husband Sam, had written Boy Meets Girl, and many other important hits. Well, Bella was also an important newspaper woman, and the New York Times had given her an assignment to cover certain angles of the Truman inauguration. All very well, but dear Bella had no place to stay--Washington was booked solid.

Helen had this house in Georgetown that she was renting from one of Hemingway's former wives, and in the basement--it was an English basement house with maid's quarters downstairs--very attractive. That's where Bella stayed. Not only because it was the only available space, but also, Helen couldn't devote time to playing hostess during this time as she was swamped with other obligations. And Bella, being a friend, would understand.

My friend, George Byron, and I had gone over to help Helen get set up for Bella. George knew Bella quite well. Helen says, "I haven't got a maid. Will you all go downstairs with Bella and help make the bed." Bella says, "I can make a bed." She and George go downstairs, and he is helping her unpack, and arrange the bed. Suddenly, out of left field she hauls off and socks the poor guy in the face! They come upstairs and George says, with icy but gentlemanly calm, "I wouldn't touch that bitch with a ten foot ladder!" Of course, we all broke up, including Bella. Brilliant writer but a bit unpredictable, would you say?

Scobie: Back to her political activities, did you feel that Helen had the same power, respect, and clout that she would have had, had she been a man?

Pick: Maybe in some respects more.

Scobie: In what way?

Pick: Well, she was beautiful and intelligent and famous, and those things don't hurt, you know. And you can accept her beauty and all that, but when you find a high degree of intelligence on top of that, that charismatic thing is very, very powerful. And I don't think she used it to the fullest extent. She just had it. Now, Kennedy may have used his, and planned it, but not Helen.

Scobie: You don't think she was conscious of herself?

Pick: When she got involved in anything, she was much too involved in that thing to be conscious of "self." I'm sure she used her qualities; after all, she had to use them as an actress. And it was a simple thing for her to apply them without even being conscious of doing so.

Scobie: Did she ever get frustrated about the fact that she couldn't get something through Congress that she wanted to get through?

Pick: I don't remember any particular issue, but I know she was very disturbed with some of the things with the Atomic Energy Commission. That I can recall well.

Scobie: How did she act when she was frustrated? What would she do?

Pick: Well, she certainly wouldn't reveal her frustrations to the wrong sources. I can assure you of that. And gossip would never become a part of it or using some personality as the reason for it. But I'm sure she must have had her frustrations. But there again, when you're in the theater, you could be having an unhappy love affair, but you couldn't project that on stage, in front of an audience. It's none of their business. They didn't pay their money to come and see you go through your own personal trauma, and I think she was too schooled to expose her own vulnerabilities. I never saw her get upset on the floor of Congress or in public in any way except for one time.

Scobie: Oh?

Pick: I don't know which play it was, whether she was working with David Belasco or whatever. But unpredictably, one day she got so upset during rehearsal time that she blindly jumped what she thought

- Pick: was going to be over the orchestra pit into the aisle. But she miscalculated and damn near killed herself! [Laughs] Because in a darkened theater, with only rehearsal lights, you can't really see over the stage.
- Scobie: Was it during a performance?
- Pick: No, this was during a rehearsal. And it's the only thing I think she would ever cite to you that she did that was really wild.
- Scobie: But at some point, no matter how controlled you are, it seems to me an individual has to let it all out.
- Pick: Well, I never saw that.
- Scobie: Never?
- Pick: Never. On an issue, yes. But about a personal thing or anything like that, no. Maybe she and Melvyn did when we weren't with them, but I never noticed it. She'd just sit and look at somebody, you know, and then begin to rationalize the whole thing. She's quick to do that.
- Scobie: How would she do that?
- Pick: She just had that inner calm--that spirit. Some people do.
- Scobie: Did she ever verbalize her rationalization? What was her thought process?
- Pick: Simple. If she wasn't prepared to say something, she kept quiet. She never voices an opinion or makes an observation on an important issue without thinking it through, and thoroughly documenting it. I think she inherited that kind of a mind from her engineer father.
- Scobie: So she would never come home, as most of us do, and yell at the kids because we're mad, or something like that?
- Pick: [Laughs] I never remember it. And I think everybody else would back me up on that who's been close to her. Maybe Evie would have an incident or two, but I never saw it. Helen was too secure in her personal life and too appreciative of what was happening for her and the challenges. She thought very little in terms of herself. She was thinking in terms of ideas and ideals. And that's the whole reason behind her control. With an idea you can't get as frustrated and upset as you can with personal problems.
- Scobie: Do you think that there were areas in which she felt insecure as a person, as so many of us do?

Pick: On a personal level, I'd not venture to say. But as a professional, never, never. She'd had too much experience in the theater, so she wasn't insecure in that. She had been disciplined in the theater, so when she was making speeches, she wasn't insecure in that area.

Scobie: You don't think she ever got nervous about anything?

Pick: If she did, I never saw it. But she must have. It wouldn't be normal, otherwise. [Laughs]

Oh, I meant to tell you this! Driving down to San Pedro one time for a speech, Rollin [Lee] McNitt, Jr., a prominent attorney and a very important man in the Democratic party, was with us.* He and Helen were discussing their speeches of that night. Helen was so impressed with what he was saying about the speech he was to give that she unconsciously adopted some of his themes and ideas and incorporated them into her speech. So, when McNitt got up to speak, there was not too much left for him to say! He ad libbed, and brilliantly.

I reminded Helen of this not too long ago, and her response was a shocked, and fervent, "Oh, my God!" Much later, McNitt mentioned this incident to me because his associate, Edythe Jacobs, was my attorney. Mr. McNitt is now dead. "Oh!" he said, "I was so frustrated. There she was up there, delivering my speech, and what could I do?" He never mentioned this to Helen. Too gracious a gentleman for that. And perhaps, in a subtle way, he was flattered!

Scobie: Well, now, if someone got mad at her, did she get hurt?

Pick: I've never seen anyone mad at her. I really haven't. What is there to get mad at?

Scobie: Well, supposing somebody didn't take her advice.

Pick: That might apply to the children.

Scobie: No matter how much you like somebody, you can get irritated with them. And that's human.

Pick: Well, she would sit down and rationalize, you know. And if she felt the other party or parties were right, she would yield. But only after being thoroughly convinced that the opponent's idea was better than the conviction she held. She never had a closed mind.

Scobie: What about in the office. Did anybody ever get frustrated?

*In his review of this transcript, George Byron states that Mr. Pick and Helen Douglas were driving to San Diego with Rollin Lee McNitt, Sr.

- Pick: Well, Evie's a very emotional gal. And she's a Syrian--of Syrian origin--and she's a very moody lady. Well, in my experience, many Semitics are that way. Their emotions tend to be more on the surface. But Evie could get mad.
- Scobie: Did she ever get mad at Helen?
- Pick: Oh, no, I never saw her mad at Helen, but I've seen her mad about her own life. That is what she would get mad about.
- Scobie: Back to the Atomic Energy Commission, do you remember specifically what upset her?
- Pick: No, because I wasn't around then. I just remember that she did not want certain things to happen with the Atomic Energy Commission, and she really worked on that. She got to know a great many scientists through that, too, whom she saw a great deal of.
- Scobie: Did they come to the house?
- Pick: They'd come to the house, come to the office. She was fascinated with that entire thing.
- Scobie: Did she stand out among the legislators, in terms of her interest in atomic energy?
- Pick: Yes, but I think she stood out mostly in terms of the Foreign Affairs Committee.
- Scobie: In what way?
- Pick: In that she knew her subject so well and, if necessary, never hesitated to ask for information she might need to fill out a point. And she liked it. She liked it very much. And of course, Jacob Javits was on that committee--there were some brilliant men--Yes, I think she enjoyed the Foreign Affairs Committee. Really dedicated.
- Scobie: So you would say that in committee, she did have quite a bit of influence.
- Pick: Oh, yes, I think so. Not the first year, because during the first two terms nobody has much influence. But after that, when they got to know and respect her, I know she had influence. Her record confirms that.
- Scobie: And that didn't come from connections or anything.

Pick: Nothing. I've told you she was, and is, an avid reader. Where she gets the time for it all, I don't know. And when she was on a subject, she would investigate and find out all about it or get the person in who could help her. She knew who to get, or if she didn't know who to get, she found out.

It might be interesting to make a few points here. There were never any "yes" people or phonies around, as is the case with so many who are in the public eye. They didn't need this ego hype. They took care of their obligations, willingly. Mel helped his brother and family. And Mel helped his mother to a great extent. These things are only natural to normal people. But a phony they could smell as far away as the next county! And hated it. Not that they weren't generous or anything like that. But, if they sensed a hanger-on, forget it. A waste of time. I mean, they weren't cold, or anything like that. They simply didn't see them.

And they were never on the Hollywood party circuit in the true sense. I do remember a party they gave at the house at 326 South Hudson to raise money for something. This is the nearest they ever came to that sort of thing. I remember there was a publicity agent involved. They were using Melvyn's and Helen's house for bait, is what they were doing. [Laughs] And the publicity man got a little loaded and I'll never forget him going up to Louella Parsons and saying, "Hello, Lolly, you old bitch! You finally got here!" [Laughter] That was very funny. Not unkind. Because he was stoned, and she was a little tiddly too, I think.

Scobie: Was Mel well respected among the Hollywood set? Did people like him?

Pick: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure professionally--well, he was one of the top stars. I don't think Melvyn was as big box-office as a few of the others like Robert Taylor, but he certainly has lasted longer, and as a character actor he was and is superb.

Family Life in Washington

Scobie: Well, now what was their family life like say, from '47 to '49?

Pick: It was different, you see, because Mel was away from Washington a good deal of that time.

Scobie: Right. Can you describe that, recall that at all?

Pick: Well, you see, there again Helen was so involved in Congress, and Melvyn was away.

Scobie: Where was he?

Pick: He was back here doing pictures after I got back, but he was in India during the war, among other places. So I wasn't there then. Evie was there.

Scobie: When you came back, while Helen was in Congress and you were there working with her, what went on as far as Mel was concerned?

Pick: I don't remember his ever being in Washington while I was there.

Scobie: How did she see him?

Pick: Well, she was always out here [in Los Angeles] for something, you know, to make a speech or such. I don't even know whether they had sold the house by then or not.

Scobie: The Outpost?

Pick: Yes.

Scobie: Now, what about the children? Where were they during this period?

Pick: They were with Helen in Washington, part of the time that I remember, and they may have been out here with Mel. Mel could have still been in the house.

Scobie: I think Peter some of the time was back here in boarding school.

Pick: Right, could have been.

Scobie: Now, how about Mary Helen? Was she in Washington the whole time?

Pick: I don't know. There again, Evie is the answer there.

Scobie: So you weren't too aware of all this, as you were in the late thirties.

Pick: No, no.

Scobie: Now, in the office, there was you and Evie and Juanita. Juanita didn't stay very long.

Pick: She was there for about six or eight months, I think.

Scobie: And then she left.

Pick: I think she left to come back out here. She got married or something.

Scobie: Right. So who else was in the office?

Pick: Well, there was a southern gal who had been a temporary person there. I remember her because she was southern and she wasn't particularly-- well, she wasn't knowledgeable about politics. She was just a good secretary and had been with other congressmen. And she's the only other one I really remember.

Scobie: So it was just basically you and Evie manning the staff.

Pick: Right.

Scobie: You must have been terribly busy. Now, did you help Helen draft any of her speeches?

Pick: No, not really. Because that all had become a very technical thing.

Scobie: So you mainly answered correspondence.

Pick: Not so. My responsibilities extended far beyond that.

Scobie: But you did monitor the correspondence from the district.

Pick: That is correct. And took care of her constituents, and that kind of thing.

Scobie: That was part of your responsibility?

Pick: Right.

Scobie: Do you have any of that correspondence?

Pick: I doubt it. Helen would.

Scobie: You probably would have left it there.

Pick: Sure.

Scobie: Then did you have a secretary, or did you type it?

Pick: We typed it, both Evelyn and I. Infinitely easier and faster. Listen, you got to be a jack-of-all-trades.

Scobie: Now, Helen was in the office the better part of the time and ran the home. How did she manage that?

Pick: She was just a clever and efficient lady. And they surely didn't have the staff in Washington they had out here, and the servants. They had temporary help that would come in from time to time, when they could get it.

Scobie: But not the larger staff.

Pick: No.

Scobie: I would like to ask you again about decisions. Whom did she turn to for advice?

Pick: Well, with the children, their home, or anything like that, it would be Melvyn, of course. Otherwise it would depend upon who was most concerned with the particular decision, the authority that she could turn to and say, "Well, what do you think about this?" An exceptional person--and Helen is that. She knows that if you don't have all the answers, go to the source and get them. Always questioning; always asking! She would ask me questions, she asked Evie questions, but I don't think we ever had any real impact upon her decision, except in social or household matters.

Scobie: I asked earlier if you felt Helen was really committed to the concerns she demonstrated, and you said, "Yes." What is it about her that makes you feel she was genuinely committed to the things?

Pick: Well, number one, she's a deeply dedicated and genuine person. Number two, she wouldn't approach anything that didn't interest her, or that she didn't think she was capable of dealing with. She's not going to bother with trivia. And she's taken on some big loads, believe me! That's the "why."

She cuts through all the red tape, and she says, "This is it! This is what I've got to concentrate on here." So once she's concentrated on it, absorbed it, it's like a person in a role, you know. You live with it. You think about it--all the different angles, and sides of it, and you talk to other knowledgeable people.

I don't think there is one phony issue she ever followed. She never supported the oil people, who are very powerful out here, just because they were powerful, and could give her money for her campaign. She never had any contacts with them. Politically she mostly associated with people who had very little money.

Scobie: So, in that sense, would you agree that she was not a political realist?

Pick: Well, she didn't have to be. She knew that if she got in a spot she would survive. She wouldn't go down the drink just because she hadn't accepted money from somebody to whom she'd make promises.

Scobie: But she didn't win the 1950 campaign!

Pick: No, she didn't. And that was probably one of the reasons, her integrity. Of course, Nixon had all the money people on his side, if money was the issue. The facts of this campaign were never as strongly presented as they should have been, either. This is well documented!

Remember, if you control the press and the other media, as Helen did not and Nixon did, you've got a powerful weapon. Had television been as fully developed then as it is now, with equal time--facing the people in their own homes--the outcome of this wretched business could well have assumed an utterly different aspect.

Scobie: But don't you think that if she were really concerned about the issues that she pushed in Congress that she would have gone on and run again after 1950?

Pick: Well, maybe she had a "gut feeling" that "Okay, now, I've been told by this election that I should spend more time with my family." That's a possibility that they needed her, now. I just don't know the answer. Helen would have to say that. I just don't know. But remember--Helen did do a lot after that. She accomplished a great deal.

I think her general reaction to losing was that it was over. She might have made mistakes somewhere, but she's not going to sit around and waste the rest of her life worrying about that. The fact that she didn't win, and what an s.o.b. Nixon is, and all that. I've never heard her say, or suggest that--ever. Everybody else has said it, but never a hint of any of this thing about him from Helen.

Scobie: Why, do you think?

Pick: I think she feels he's got his own troubles, and certainly, whatever he did that was dishonest as far as she was concerned, history will attest to. It already has! She has had nothing to do with what has happened, and he surely has had to pay his price. Maybe that's one of the reasons, because she doesn't hold things against people. She doesn't like him any the more for it, but she's fortunate in that she has been on the scene to witness what has happened to the man who was so viciously against her. And I'm sure she has been asked many times, "Well, what do you think about Richard Nixon?" She dismisses it all. Everybody's said it all.

Pick: As a matter of fact, I watched the film, All the President's Men, several times in the theater and on cable TV because I love documentaries. But I finally experienced a feeling of profound revulsion, brought on by my vivid memories of that 1950 campaign and its sordidness. Of course this is in no way tied in with that campaign, but it does serve to remind us of the character of the man in question--if such a reminder is necessary. Remember, none of this was triggered by Helen, and she has consistently refused to even discuss it with me, or others. That, in large part, takes the measure of the lady.

And Helen didn't just retire. She was active in many, many things.

Scobie: Do you think that if she had run again that there would have been any friction between her and Mel?

Pick: Well, she let him do what he wanted to do. He let her do what she wanted to do. And they both knew that if you thwart somebody, that isn't going to lead to a happy home existence, if the other person has a sincere desire to achieve, and the goal is a mutually constructive one.

Scobie: But on the other hand, can a marriage go on and on if you're separated constantly?

Pick: But, realize that if you're in the theater or politics, you're used to that, as was the case with Helen and Mel.

A lot of wives are used to it, whose husbands are in the business or professional world. You've got to be resilient; you've got to adjust to the situation, otherwise, without this trust and love, where are you? No place! Helen and Mel had always been accustomed to that. And it was nothing to pick up the phone and talk each night, no matter where they were.

Scobie: Did they do that?

Pick: Oh, yes. Or hop a plane to San Francisco, if Helen was up there. It was nothing. Helen and Mel love San Francisco, and have a great many friends there.

Scobie: So they really saw a lot of each other, even when she was in Washington.

Pick: Oh, yes. As much as humanly possible and reasonable. When you think about it, the greatest temptation is they were both so attractive and both so successful and must have had many temptations,

Pick: and it didn't interfere with their lives. Because you can't be that attractive and that successful and talented, and not have other people interested in you!

There was one episode--I don't know the entire story. When Helen was appearing in The Cat and the Fiddle in San Francisco, an East Indian gentleman came to her dressing room bearing a gift of jewels--rubies, emeralds, et cetera, and begged her to accept them. She had never seen the man before, thought this was a hoax and that the jewels were paste, and gently but firmly refused them. And of course, that's the last she ever saw of him.

Well, the next day she reads an article about him, on the front page of the paper. Turns out he was an honest-to-God potentate--a rajah. DanTotheroh, a friend of theirs, was backstage when the gentleman came to her dressing room, and to this day he has never let her forget this. Later I asked her, "Helen, what do you think His Highness could possibly have had in mind?" Her reply, "Well, Walter--Tonight or Never!!"

Scobie: Did she have any really close or intimate male friends?

Pick: Well, there was DanTotheroh whom I've mentioned, who was a playwright, and George O'Neal, and Jack Leighter and his wife, Lola. Those were the ones that she'd see quite often, and if she was going to be alone at night, she'd say, "Come on over, Jack and Lola. Come and have dinner."

Scobie: What about just men alone? Were there any that she essentially "dated" when she was alone there in Washington?

Pick: I don't remember. I seriously doubt it! If it happened, I was never aware of it.

Scobie: And Melvyn? Did he have flames and so on?

Pick: Oh, hardly "flames"! I used to go out on double dates with him when Helen was away. [Laughs]

Scobie: Who would he go out with?

Pick: Good lord, I don't remember such trivia! I do know she would have been attractive, intelligent, have had a pronounced sense of humor, and interesting. Sounds like quite a catalog. But you see, Mel couldn't abide being bored. He had been spoiled rotten by Helen. And we'd go out to dinner, and dance, and have a pleasant evening. All very normal and civilized.

Scobie: Did Helen know about it?

Pick: I'm sure she did.

Scobie: Did it upset her?

Pick: Why on earth would it! Melvyn's not a fool! And I'm sure that while she was in Washington and Melvyn was out here, she saw a lot of people for dinner. Because you cannot have those potentials and not be desired by people.

Scobie: Absolutely. But you can't think of any people in particular.

Pick: No, no.

Helen Gahagan Douglas: Some Reflections on the Total Picture

Scobie: Where were you after 1950?

Pick: Well, I went back to New York, and then I started this business, House of Shows. Then I came back out here.

Scobie: So you didn't overlap with them much after 1951?

Pick: Very little.

Scobie: Did you see them at all?

Pick: Yes, as often as I could. Helen came out here one time, and she came over to dinner with George Byron and his wife, Eva. We'd certainly see each other frequently. Helen always had somebody that she wanted to contact, and if I was free I'd drive her. She had many other friends here. Did anybody in these interviews mention the gal who ran for councilwoman out here and oohh! her husband, the Democratic National Committeeman of California, had died.

She was very popular with the Dodgers baseball team. She made that a big issue; she now lives in a big mansion out in Bel Air. Helen stays with her occasionally when she comes out here. I remember her from the years when I was up in Vermont, and she came up there one time. Oh, she was very well known.

Scobie: Roz [Rosalind] Wyman?

Pick: Roz Wyman. Right. She won the election. Have you talked with her?

- Scobie: She's being interviewed for the same series on political women, but not in the Douglas component of the project.
- Pick: Because Helen was her idol, and that's why she went into politics. She was a young girl when she came up to Vermont when I was there. Now there's a woman who's different than Helen, you know. Completely different!
- Scobie: She served as a driver for Helen during the '50 campaign. She was just a young college student.

As a Professional

- Scobie: What were the kinds of things that Helen was trying to accomplish as vice-president of the State Democratic Committee?
- Pick: Well, implementing the New Deal program, and the good things that are in the state, and women's rights. She's always been for equal rights for women.
- Scobie: In what way?
- Pick: Well, it's a known and established fact that she's always been. When she was in Congress, she was one of the most dedicated workers in the area of equal rights for women. And I think this was due to some of the women who were out here. Esther Peterson; there was also Esther Murray who was very important in her life.
- Scobie: I think Esther Murray's the one I'm thinking of that ran for Congress.
- Pick: Yes, she did, I believe, and she was one of the influential people in Helen's early political life, because she was able, a very able woman. And I notice you have in there that Helen joined the League of Women Voters. Well, I don't remember too much about that except when she spoke before them one time, and there was real friction between the Democratic side, which Helen represented, and the Republican side. [Laughs] But I was never aware that she became a member of the league.
- Scobie: You said Helen worked hard for equal rights.
- Pick: Right.
- Scobie: How would you put Helen in the spectrum of controversy today about feminism and the feminist movement?

Pick: Well, first of all, she is certainly not a feminist per se. What she wants, I believe--what she has tried to achieve for herself is to be so thoroughly informed and indoctrinated as to be qualified to work for the issues and talk for the issues with authority. And a lot of women haven't had that experience. And Helen has. And I think she wants other women to be able to express themselves better. She has, you see, always been a leader from a star to politics, and that's covering one hell of a lot of territory! She's never had a problem of identity as so many women have had, in trying to establish themselves. If an activity or an individual isn't combined with intelligence and education, I don't think Helen would even be the least bit interested.

I think that's the excitement to her. That women do have better opportunities today. They can make a choice of whether they want to be a mother only. Or mother and activist, or just activist, or whatever it is they want.

Scobie: Did you ever hear her discuss frustrations as to how to manage career, family, and wife roles?

Pick: No, because I'm sure she wouldn't have entered these areas if she hadn't thought that she could combine them successfully. See, these weren't solely emotional things with Helen--to be a star on Broadway or in opera. There was a compulsive desire deep inside to do something. Now, I don't think she went into the theater because she felt she could take a portion of people's lives and make them happy for a few hours, take them away from their problems, but I'm sure that was back of it, too.

Because no great performer can ever be truly great without compassion. A composer can write beautiful music and be an unadulterated bastard in real life. But it's very hard to do that when you're out in front of the public. The writer can go off and hide and have his tantrums but a performing artist can't, any more than a mother could! If she does, she's going to have an unhappy family life, or, as an artist, a tenuous career.

Scobie: But even so, at least judging from what I read, what other people say, and what I feel, trying to combine motherhood and career and being a good wife is difficult. You're constantly torn, because somehow the puzzle pieces are supposed to fit together.

Pick: But they don't always.

Scobie: Right. And there are only so many hours in a day. Many women feel torn between how to balance it all out exactly so you feel right about it.

Pick: Well, I think there are very few women who have been able to do that. I believe one was Mrs. Roosevelt. She had raised her family before she got really involved in the president's political career and in social welfare problems. Her children were all on the way up, growing up. When it became mandatory for her to appear so often in public, she no longer had to be continually at home with the children. It was very hard for her to do this, as she was a very shy and private person, as you know.

There are very few who can mesh these things together, and this person has to be a rational person. And Helen is rational. And you must be able to think things through before becoming involved. Before Helen gets involved, I'm sure she's thought way ahead of what's already happened, or what's going to happen.

As a Mother

Pick: And that's the only way I could explain it. And since I haven't seen the kids too often in the last few years, I don't know how this has played an effect on Mary Helen's life, of going and living in a kibbutz, and whether she's trying to take care of the fact that her father is part Jewish, there, I don't know. Whether she joined the Peace Corps because of something else.

I'm not sure, from my view, without knowing the real basic problem there, and I guess Mary has had psychoanalysis and a lot of different things. All that our parents can make of our lives is to give us a sense of proportion and as much opportunity as they can give us, and we've got to go on our own, somewhere along the road. And maybe Mary Helen has had too much closeness there, too much independence, too much of many things. I don't know. That's another whole story there.

But when I see Mary Helen, I love her, and I think to me she's a whole person. And unfortunately, that height doesn't make a girl feel happy, for number one. I saw her do a play out here, and she did it brilliantly. It was an O'Neill thing, and I said to Helen and Mel afterwards, "You know, Mary Helen is very good, but you've got to find her a playwright who can write for her, because of her size."

And this was a big girl in the play, and she was very, very good. But now Helen was in that position where she could get a playwright for Mary Helen. They wrote plays for her. But Mary Helen was not a star overnight and I don't think has ever been on Broadway.

Pick: And that's hard for children to grow up with two nationally-known parents. It's bad enough when one of them is well known.

Scobie: Did you ever see or hear them refer to the frustration they felt?

Pick: No. They were too young when I was really close to them. And I've only seen Mary Helen out here sporadically. We never got that deep into serious conversation.

Scobie: And the same with Peter?

Pick: I've seen Mary Helen more often than I have Peter. I haven't seen Peter since he got married.

Scobie: So she's never really opened up about her problems.

Pick: No, but I'm sure she has to someone. She wouldn't have gone through psychoanalysis and all that. But I know Helen and Mel did whatever they instinctively felt was right as parents to make their children's lives happy; and if you don't have a happy childhood, it's hard to have a happy adult life. And if there were problems, it's not entirely their fault, because they gave them closeness and love--and that's the basic thing for children--plus a roof over their heads.

Scobie: You can't blame yourself for what happened to kids.

Pick: And can you imagine the possible combinations of children from Helen and Melvyn uniting in marriage. There are certain characteristics of his and certain characteristics of hers. And it could turn into a bloody volcano in a person that normally would have been okay, you know? To get all the dynamic things of both of them. I don't think that happened to Mary Helen, but that could be a possibility. It happened with the son of friends of ours. Daddy was a famous actor. Wow! This Robinson kid was a monster. He was something else!

Scobie: Whatever happened to him?

Pick: I don't know. I remember he locked me up in a jail one time. They had a ranch up in one of the canyons, and they gave a children's party. And on this ranch, he had a jailhouse that he had built. And I went by to pick Peter up later in the day, and sonny boy says, "Come on over here, Walter. Look at the inside of my jailhouse." With that he pushes me in and locks the door. There I am, an acre from the house, immobilized. But, in retrospect, it does have its amusing side. Well, I don't have very pleasant memories of him.

- Pick: But that was a different thing. He was partially neglected as a child, and his mother had been married previously and had a daughter by another marriage, and he hardly ever saw his father. His father was so busy making money. Now, there is a situation where the parents were to blame. Because he grew up mixed up because they had a mixed-up life.
- Scobie: What about Melvyn's son, Gregory?
- Pick: Oh, Gregory. I was very fond of him because I knew him better.
- Scobie: How did he fit into the whole scheme?
- Pick: Very well, when I've seen him in the family picture. He came out here to stay with Helen and Mel. This was when they had the Carmel house. I got along with him just beautifully. And I drove us all up to Carmel, and we had fun and he was charming. I don't know what's happened to him since then. I think he became an artist. He did some drawings or something. I've forgotten what.
- Scobie: How did he and Helen get along?
- Pick: Very well. There again, Helen got along with Mrs. Lena Hesselberg, Melvyn's mother. Which was hard. With Melvyn's son Gregory, it wasn't hard at all. He's just a nice boy, really charming.
- Scobie: Were there ever any problems with him?
- Pick: Not while I was with them. I don't know whether he had any later on. I think he may have had a marital problem later on, I don't know.
- Scobie: How did Helen treat him? Like a son?
- Pick: Yes. She was very fond of him. He was a very agreeable youngster. So you couldn't help liking him. And he wasn't--"Well, Melvyn Douglas is my father" kind of thing, you know. None of that. He'd lived with his mother for a long while before he came out here. I think he was about ten years old when he came out.
- Scobie: But was he there all the five years you were there?
- Pick: Oh no. I don't recall how long he was there. Because I'd even forgotten that I moved out of the house over to Berkeley Heights. But he was there a few months, that I remember.
- Scobie: Did Melvyn's first wife ever come into the picture?

Pick: No, I never saw her. She was an actress and not, evidently, much in the brain department although she was a very pretty woman.

The Grandmothers

Scobie: Did the mothers come to visit often in the late 'thirties?

Pick: Well, Mrs. Hesselberg lived out here. And Aunt Lillian, Helen's mother, came out to visit.

Scobie: And what happened?

Pick: Occasionally they'd play bridge together. Helen's mother was a different type of woman. She wasn't involved with frills.

Scobie: I can't imagine her playing bridge!

Pick: Yes, they played bridge. But they weren't often together, because they were entirely different personalities.

Scobie: Did each of them in their own way try to influence Helen and Mel?

Pick: Well, Mrs. Hesselberg would try, but it was hopeless. I mean, actually Helen was probably more considerate of Mrs. Hesselberg than Melvyn was because his mother annoyed him. And after all, he was supporting her and all that sort of thing, you know, because Papa Hesselberg left little other than some old music.

Scobie: Did the kids go over and visit her? Or did she take them places?

Pick: No, they were not overly fond of her. She wasn't too interested in anyone other than herself, and these types with dubious titles, and such.

Scobie: Dubious what?

Pick: Titles--pedigrees--phonies.

She took the opportunity once, while Helen and Mel were away, to try to arrange a series of musical evenings referred to as "musicales," for which she collected the darndest bunch of characters imaginable. I rather resented this because I thought--of course she's Melvyn's mother, but--she wouldn't ask to do this if they weren't away.

Pick: Well, I confined her project to one evening. You see, I had a little friction with her at times because she was a domineering dowager. She was a little like the mother on "The Jeffersons." Do you ever see that show?

Scobie: Yes.

Pick: I love that program. If she could get her foot in the door, she could be very domineering. She was a southern belle, with a will of iron. But the same kind of feeling. And Helen would treat her just the same way as the wife did in that show, you know. [Laughs] Tolerate her. And yet, on the other hand, she could be the soul of charm, when so inclined.

Scobie: Can you describe her physically?

Pick: She was very tall, very bosomy, and very grande dame southern belle, and was until she was about ninety-two years of age, very concerned about her breasts, you know. And very independent.

Scobie: And how was she when she came to the house?

Pick: Well, she didn't interfere too much, I can tell you that. Also, she wasn't at the house that often. She had her own little circle of Hollywood mothers clubs and those kinds of things.

Scobie: [Laughs] What's a Hollywood mothers club?

Pick: It was a group of mothers, Hollywood mothers. And then she had her musicale group, and all those things that are diverting. Well, I'm glad she had them. At least they'd occupy her interest.

Scobie: Did she try and run Mel and Helen's life at all?

Pick: No, she couldn't come close to it.

Scobie: Did she gather the kids and take them off places and things?

Pick: No, no. As I said before, they weren't that fond of her. She wasn't--well, she wasn't that kind of a grandmother. A cuddling grandmother, you know.

Scobie: Was Aunt Lillian a cuddling grandmother?

Pick: Not really.

Scobie: Would Aunt Lillian do special things with the kids?

Pick: No, she was a little old by that time. She died when she was ninety-something.

Scobie: So she really couldn't take the kids back to Vermont on her own.

Pick: No, she didn't do that. She had a physical problem, the poor lady. She couldn't move fast or well because her legs had become quite large which hindered her movements.

All the Mussens, and Helen is one of them--this is one of her characteristics on my mother's side--as they grow older, they get more wrinkles than most people do. My mother was very wrinkled. Aunt Lillian was very wrinkled.

Scobie: Helen is, too.

Pick: And Helen is. In that magazine that came out--Ms., you know? On the cover, it shocked me, but then I thought, "Why not be honest?" But they are inclined to that. Dry skin. Although Helen has certainly taken care of herself as well as any woman could. I want to say this. She had very keen, probing eyes, which Helen has. She'd look at you--with penetrating, blue eyes and you're hooked--just as with Helen!

Lillian was a woman who'd run a big house and a big family. I got along with her splendidly. But she was kind of outspoken. Because she was independent, you see. Lena Priscilla Hesselberg was not. Aunt Lillian would say anything. In short, Lillian wasn't the kind of person that could get out and sport around with the grandchildren that way. And I don't think she particularly cared about that.

Scobie: It just wasn't in her personality.

Pick: Right.

Scobie: Where did she stay when she came to visit?

Pick: She stayed at the house.

Scobie: Was there an extra room?

Pick: I don't know whether they put up a bed in Helen's room, or what. She really didn't stay very long.

Scobie: How did Mrs. Hesselberg feel about having been married to a Jew?

Pick: I never heard her express herself, one way or the other, but probably inside her soul she may have been more anti-Semitic than Mrs. Gahagan. I never heard her say that, anything like that. Her qualities were all so old world and outmoded and they just didn't belong in Melvyn's and Helen's life. They were as nice to her as they possibly could be, but they didn't want her to live with them, and thank God she didn't.

Scobie: So she wasn't really part of their everyday lives.

Pick: No, and never there for any parties or anything like that. Well, she wouldn't be interested in the subject matter.

More on Helen Gahagan Douglas's Parents

Scobie: I'd like to drop back at this point and ask you if you knew Helen when she was a child.

Pick: No. She's older than I am, and when we went to visit the Gahagans--they lived in Brooklyn--she would be with her family, unless she was doing a play in New York. Then, of course, we would go to the play and that is when we would see her--be with her, although we didn't see much of her.

Scobie: How much older is she than you?

Pick: She was born November 25th, 1900, and let's see--wait a minute, I can tell you exactly. Fourteen years. When she was twenty-one, she was a big star on Broadway.

Scobie: And that meant nothing to you in terms of getting to know her.

Pick: No, I knew her brothers and her sister probably a little bit better than I did her because she was always so busy.

Scobie: Tell me more about her parents.

Pick: Her father was a very dynamic man and the kind of man who would work for two or three weeks at a time, with hardly any sleep, on a big contract. Then he would just relax. He died when he was around fifty-four, I think, so I don't remember too much about him, except that he was always a very generous man. We children were too young, but when they entertained my mother and father when they went to New York, it could not have been other than a lovely and exciting time. They felt quite close.

Scobie: How are you related to Helen?

Pick: I'm related to her mother, Lillian. My mother and her mother were half-sisters.

Scobie: Did they grow up together?

Pick: As children, yes, but my mother was younger than Helen's mother. But I think we were as close to them as we were to any other relative--well, certainly much more so than to anyone on my father's side. Only later in life I got to know one of my cousins on my father's side--Vernon Pick--better than I had any of the others.

He came out here after he discovered the first really important uranium strike. We saw a lot of each other. But in general I've been closer to my mother's side of the family rather than my father's, and so have my sisters. Also, my father being an army officer, we were more apt to go to places where my mother's family was than to Wisconsin, where my father's family was.

Scobie: What kind of a mother did Helen have?

Pick: She was very authoritative. She loved to collect antique plates. Every time she went to Europe, she'd come back with stacks of china and many, many other things. She was an interesting woman, and the only time that I ever remember facing up to her was because of something that she said that kind of worried and annoyed me. She was very anti-Semitic. And so was my mother. Our families were both staunch Republicans. And of course my aunt, Helen's mother, was more so because she lived in New York. Those were the days when there was much status consciousness. For instance, we Pick children weren't allowed to play with enlisted men's children and that kind of thing. It was a very peculiar thing that I never truly understood, and how I ever was changed, I'll never know--or Helen.
[Laughs]

Back to Helen's mother. One time, when she came out to visit Helen and Mel, she made a very anti-Semitic remark. I couldn't let her get by with it. I said, "You know, Aunt Lillian, you are killing Helen's, your own daughter's, children." And this was during the Nazi era. I said, "Even though they are only part Jewish, in the eyes of the Nazis, they are Jewish, and you're just adding coals to the fire." And she was quite startled. But I felt that way, because there was too much of that.

Scobie: Did this spill over into other minority groups? Was she hostile to blacks?

Pick: Not particularly. In New York you didn't run into that so much where blacks were concerned. And I think the real problem was when Helen's father died [in 1931]. He was the wheel in the Gahagan Construction Company. He had some brilliant engineers working with him, but now there were twin brothers, who were older, at the helm. One had been a complete playboy and had had a nervous breakdown. Neither one of them had been exposed to engineering.

Now her father left quite a bit of money, but to run a corporation like that with these huge dredges cost a fortune. So the family had to get a loan, and they got it from--I think it was a financial partner of his, the owner of Rheingold Beer in New York, Jacob Liebman. [Spells out name] Jacob Liebman founded Rheingold.

And he made the Gahagans pay off that loan, at full interest and everything, and I think my aunt resented that because my uncle didn't work that way, you know. He wasn't that hard a pusher when he knew somebody needed help. He was generous.

Scobie: So you really think the anti-Semitism was accentuated by that.

Pick: Could well be!

They were having a tough time, and finally her youngest brother, who was a prominent lawyer, took over the business after one of the twins died. And of course, he knew management. So all he needed to do was to get men in there who were qualified engineers. But that was a tough time, I guess.

Scobie: Who ran the household, Helen's mother or father?

Pick: Not her father. As far as I know. When we went to Vermont, he was never up there. I remember he went up with us one time and didn't stay very long. Helen's mother was a good manager. She had to be, because he'd call up at six o'clock and say, "I'm bringing ten people home for dinner." But she had the wherewithal to cope with that--the servants and an efficiently run household, but it wasn't easy.

Scobie: Today there is much discussion about why women have so much trouble conceiving of themselves as a career person. Some believe that a woman has to start thinking of herself as being able to have a career when she's very young. Was there any difference in terms of what Helen's parents thought Helen could do versus what the boys could accomplish in terms of careers?

Pick: No, because she was important long before the boys were. Overnight she was a star on Broadway, from one play. You see, Helen has always psychologically prepared herself for everything. She's quite

- Pick: philosophical, and I'm sure as a young girl that she was probably more mature at her age than most of her associates or friends were. She's a profound thinker. Light-hearted and lots of fun, but a profound thinker.
- Scobie: Nevertheless, some women do embark on a career, but when it comes to the point of getting married, there is something from her rearing that says, "Now it's time to raise the family and set aside the career, at least for a period." And Helen never did this.
- Pick: No, she didn't.
- Scobie: So what was it in her upbringing that made her feel comfortable with breaking away from the stereotyped picture of being a mother and homemaker?
- Pick: Well, she didn't have to break away from that because she never had that in her upbringing. Her mother was a wise woman. I'm sure she said, "Now, you shouldn't get involved in certain things." The way all mothers do. But you see, Helen is an unusual person. She didn't have to be impressed with what will happen if you don't do certain things. She knew. She was a reader. She got more from the books she read, I'm sure, than she ever got from her family or formal schooling. She was an avid reader, and not limited to any one category. She read everything, everything.
- Scobie: Do you think Lillian's anti-Semitism influenced Helen's attitude towards Mel?
- Pick: I don't know. I wasn't around then, and I wasn't at the wedding although my mother was. I imagine Lillian had her reservations, but she also was, as I say, a wise woman and realized that Helen wasn't a young, impressionable girl then. She knew what she wanted and would achieve whatever goal she set for herself.

There was never any friction between Melvyn and Aunt Lillian or anything like that. Helen was too independent then. She'd made her living. She'd made her success. So it was her decision entirely.

- Scobie: Would you say that Helen was the most important child in the family or were they all treated the same?
- Pick: There was an article written in the Saturday Evening Post years ago, and the title was, "The Flaming Gahagans," although it was written about another Gahagan family. But I thought, "If that isn't the title for Helen's family!" Her sister Lillian was dynamic, she was fun.

Pick: She came out here to visit us, and here she was vice-president of the corporation, Gahagan Construction Company, and she decided to wash our cars one day. [Laughs] I had a house I'd built in the Hollywood Hills at the time. So she puts on a bikini, backs the cars into the driveway, and there she is in her bikini, washing merrily away, and stopping traffic! [Laughs] Well, that's the way they were. You know, real people, fun people.

Scobie: This was Lilly.

Pick: Lilly.

Scobie: Did her mother's anti-Semitism ever become an issue with Helen? Was it something she consciously had to reject?

Pick: No, she knew it. From the beginning. Her mother was always that way, you see.

Scobie: But Helen never felt it and then rejected it?

Pick: Oh, no. She never argued with her mother. If she said something that Helen didn't like she'd say, "Oh, Mother, forget it."

Scobie: Yes, but if she grew up in an anti-Semitic home, at what point did she break away from that?

Pick: She personally was not anti-Semitic, because she'd been in the theater. You're exposed to all the human elements and frailties there, you know.

Scobie: And that was what really shaped her reactions.

Pick: Right. I'm sure of it. So she was prepared against carrying that into her life. And she never believed in it. I mean, there were Jewish actors and Jewish writers, and Jerome Kern, you know, and David Belasco. And she was accustomed to that.

Scobie: And as a youngster, did it enter her home?

Pick: I didn't know her as a youngster.

Scobie: Of course, you mentioned yesterday that maybe her mother's attitude started more in '31, when her dad died, and she got so mad about the loan.

Pick: Yes. Well, that's when Aunt Lillian made a couple of very caustic remarks, after that. But my mother was almost as bad.

Scobie: Was she?

Pick: And my mother was a great churchgoer and all that kind of thing, but she had also felt that way about the blacks, although she had two black maids, and she felt that way about enlisted personnel--I mean, they were inferior. They were meant to be there. This was their role in life.

Scobie: About enlisted personnel?

Pick: Yes. You couldn't play with a sergeant's child. That was the code in the army. The army's very conservative. You do not socialize with men who are underneath you. And your children don't play with their children.

Scobie: Well, I can see our time has run out. You need to go and I've got to fight freeway traffic. This has been a wonderful set of interviews, and I really appreciate your time.

Transcriber: Robert McCarger
Final Typist: Marie Herold

RESUME

Walter R. Pick

- 1956 - 1971 Partner, BYRON/PICK ASSOCIATES, Beverly Hills
Production of live industrial shows for sales,
association meetings and conventions.
- 1953 - 1956 Partner, HOUSE OF SHOWS, New York, N.Y.
Wrote and produced live Industrial Shows in
New York and Chicago.
- Some of the clients serviced under these two
associations are:
- National Association of Manufacturers
Broil-Quik Rotisserie Company
International Business Machines Company (I.B.M.)
Sylvania Electric Products Company
The Magee Carpet Company
Steinway & Sons
Men's Apparel Guild in California (MAGIC)
Charity Shows sponsored by
 Union Oil Company--Pepsi Cola--TWA--Anheuser-Busch
 --for chapters of The Junior League of Los Angeles
 and Seattle
- 1948 - 1952 Talent Consultant for Doris Sharp Enterprises,
New York City. Supervised casting for three TV
film series, commercial TV films and single appearances
on numerous network dramatic and comedy shows.
- 1946 - 1947 Administrative Assistant to Helen Gahagan and
Melvyn Douglas, Washington, D.C.
- 1941 - 1945 U.S. Army Signal Corps communications in U.S.,
North Africa, Italy, France and Germany.
- 1936 - 1941 Personal Manager for Helen Gahagan and
Melvyn Douglas, Los Angeles, California.

- 1934 - 1936 Scholarship in theater production, New York School of the Theater.
- 1935
(Summer) Member of staff, Maverick Theater, Woodstock, N.Y.
- 1932 - 1934 George Washington University, Washington, D.C. Liberal Arts. Participated in productions of Cue and Curtain, college dramatic group.
- 1932 - 1934
(Summers) Founded and managed Roadside Theater, seven miles outside Washington, D.C. When I left Washington continued as a member of the Board of Directors
1934 - 1941
- Born 1914 in Monterey, California. As the son of an American army officer lived in Manila, Honolulu, and several major cities of the United States.

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Graduated from Reed College in 1942 with a B.A. degree, and from the State University of Iowa in 1943 with an M.A. degree in Political Science.

Wage Rate Analyst with the Twelfth Regional War Labor Board, 1943-1945, specializing in agriculture and services. Research and writing in the New York public relations firm of Edward L. Bernays, 1946-1947, and research and statistics for the Oakland Area Community Chest and Council of Social Agencies 1948-1951.

Active in community affairs as a director and past president of the League of Women Voters of the Hayward Area specializing in state and local government; on county-wide committees in the field of mental health; on election campaign committees for school tax and bond measures, and candidates for school board and state legislature.

Employed in 1967 by the Regional Oral History Office interviewing in fields of agriculture and water resources, Jewish Community history, and women leaders in civic affairs and politics.

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Instructor, freshman English at University of Illinois and at Hiram College. Reporter, suburban daily newspaper, 1966-67.

Interviewer, Regional Oral History Office, 1959--; conducted interview series on University history, woman suffrage, the history of conservation and forestry, public administration and politics. Director, Earl Warren Era Oral History Project, documenting governmental/political history of California 1925-1953; director, Goodwin Knight-Edmund G. Brown Era Project.

Author of articles in professional and popular journals; instructor, summer Oral History Institute, University of Vermont, 1975, 1976, and oral history workshops for Oral History Association and historical agencies; consultant to other oral history projects; oral history editor, Journal of Library History, 1969-1974; secretary, the Oral History Association, 1970-1973.

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Assistant Executive Secretary, Organization of American Historians, 1970-73; Lecturer, History Department, Princeton University, 1975, in twentieth-century United States history; Senior Fulbright-Hays Lecturer, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1976, in United States history; Lecturer, History Department, University of California, San Diego, 1977-1979, in twentieth-century United States history; University of California award for innovative curriculum development for course on family and community history; taught oral history technique in all courses.

Professional papers at Western History Association (1969, 1973), Newberry Library (1979), Berkshire Conference on Women's History (1981); published articles in Pacific Historical Review, California Historical Quarterly, Public Historian.

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Interviewer-editor for the Regional Oral History Office, 1978-80, for the Helen Gahagan Douglas Project.

